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THE INDEPENDENT



Newspaper of the Year for photographs

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Murdoch in secret trips to Chequers

Exclusive

By Chris Blackhurst and Colin Brown

RUPERT MURDOCH has been the guest of Tony Blair at Chequers, the Prime Minister's country home, at least twice since Labour won the general election last May.

Sources at News Corporation, Mr Murdoch's media company, have also confirmed that in the run-up to the election, Mr Blair was a frequent visitor to the tycoon's London home.

News of the close contacts between the two men will severely embarrass the Prime Minister, who is trying to shake off allegations that he assisted Mr Murdoch on a business deal in Italy. Until now, it has always been assumed that the high-point of Mr Blair and Mr Murdoch's association had been a trip by the then Leader of the Opposition to address a News Corporation executive conference in Australia. However, *The Independent* has learned that their contact has been more regular - raising serious questions about the propriety of Mr Blair's dealings with the magnate.

Mr Murdoch is said by News Corporation sources to have visited the Prime Minister at Chequers on two Sundays since the election. The two men were also meeting before the election, at Mr Murdoch's luxury suite in St James's in central London.

In the election campaign, Mr



Meeting place: The building where Blair met Murdoch

Murdoch went a long way towards guaranteeing Mr Blair victory when the Sun, his traditionally Tory-leaning paper, came out in favour of Labour.

Another Murdoch newspaper, the *Times*, admitted yesterday that Mr Blair intervened on his behalf on a recent visit to Italy. Mr Blair asked Romani Prodi, the Italian Prime Minister what his government's reaction would be if Mr Murdoch bought a controlling interest in an Italian television group.

No 10 has attempted to play down the links between the two men, initially dismissing reports of Mr Blair's assistance in Italy as a "complete joke".

The detailed allegations of the meetings were put to Downing Street last night and a spokesman for the Prime Minister said: "Our response is that we do not comment on pri-

vate meetings or conversations the Prime Minister may or may not have had."

The Prime Minister was facing a call to make a statement to the Commons and his official spokesman, Alastair Campbell, is to be summoned by a committee of MPs to be questioned about the handling of the affair, including Tory claims that denials were misleading.

The Commons Committee on Public Administration, chaired by Rhodri Morgan, a Labour MP, is expected to recommend new rules of conduct should be drawn up for Prime Ministers and their involvement with private companies when they go "batting for Britain" abroad as then Lady Thatcher with arms sales.

The Prime Minister's official spokesman last night again defended No 10 and Mr Blair.

"The whole thing is a load of old baloney," he said. "Tony Blair has met Murdoch, Montgomery, [David Montgomery, chief executive of Mirror Group newspapers] and he will be meeting with Tony O'Reilly [chairman of Independent Newspapers, owner of *The Independent*]. He has met every significant media owner in the country since the election and the majority of industrialists."

■ Publisher HarperCollins has reached a financial settlement with its former publisher Stuart Profitt. He left the company over its refusal to publish Chris Patten's Hong Kong book.

Blair left in tuck, page 4



Cell mates: Nelson Mandela and President Bill Clinton peer through the bars of the cell that was home for the South African President during the 17 years he spent in Robben Island jail. Clinton's South Africa visit, page 15

Photograph: Rick Wilking/Reuters

Mandela acts on 'coup plot'

By Mary Braid
in Cape Town

PRESIDENT Nelson Mandela yesterday appointed three senior judges to investigate allegations of a plot to overthrow his government.

The decision, which took the country by surprise, follows the presentation of a military intelligence report to Mr Mandela endorsed by George Meiring, chief of the South African National Defence Force, which apparently suggested that a coup had recently been plotted.

Last night it seemed that the government was taking the possibility of a malicious motive be-

hind the report as seriously as the allegations made in it. The gravity of the situation is reflected in the heavy weight composition of the inquiry team. It will be headed by the Chief Justice, Judge Ismail Mahomed. The two other members are Judge Richard Goldstone, a member of the Constitutional Court and a UN War Crimes prosecutor, and Justice Pius Langa, deputy president of the Constitutional Court.

The inquiry begins today in camera at a secret location and is also a sign of the government's concern. The team has been ordered to report its finding as soon as possible.

The inquiry follows weeks of press speculation about the bizarre case of Robert McBride, a senior foreign affairs official and former ANC guerrilla, arrested in Mozambique with a stack of AK47s and \$11000 in his pocket.

Mr McBride is in jail in Matuto awaiting trial for arms smuggling. Right-wing newspapers have claimed that he was working for senior members of the police and military forces.

which said the inquiry would look into the "process relating to the compilation, verification and subsequent treatment of the report". A presidential aide said the inquiry would try to establish why a coup plot was spoken of - and leaked to the press - when no evidence existed to support its existence.

To add further complications, Mr McBride, infamous for his planting of a bomb in a Durban bar in 1986, is believed to have right wing enemies prominent in police and armed forces.

That the Mandela government may be more interested in the motives behind the report, than the allegations in it, was evident yesterday in a statement from Mr Mandela's office,

which said the inquiry would look into the "process relating to the compilation, verification and subsequent treatment of the report".

A presidential aide said the inquiry would try to establish why a coup plot was spoken of - and leaked to the press - when no evidence existed to support its existence.

The government has frequently complained that senior members of the police and army have not bought into the new South Africa and are working to undermine it.



Sir Richard: In charge of national review of opera

Eyre tipped for Covent Garden top job

By Paul Vallely

SIR Richard Eyre, the former director of the National Theatre who is conducting the Government's review of opera and ballet in the capital, is being tipped to take over as artistic director of the Royal Opera House.

If speculation in the arts world is correct, the move could prove controversial because Sir Richard's report, which was commissioned by Chris Smith,

the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, has not yet been completed and is not due to be published for another six weeks.

There is at this point no confirmation of the rumours which are ripe in arts circles in the wake of the resignation earlier this week of Mary Allen as chief executive of the opera house.

The Department of Culture has not been consulted on the matter, its spokeswoman said.

"We would be informed of an appointment but it's not something we'd be involved with."

A spokeswoman for the Royal Opera House said: "The post has not yet been advertised". Asked whether Sir Richard was considering applying she said: "That's something he'll have to consider when the post is advertised if there feels that is appropriate."

The appointment of Ms Allen to the job was criticised by a Commons select committee precisely because, as secretary-general of the Arts Council, she was given the job in a backroom deal without the post being advertised.

At the Arts Council, which would have to approve the appointment, its press officer, Sue Rose, said: "They got into trouble with the process last time when they bounced Mary into the job. Everybody's speculating like mad but I can't be-

lieve they would make the same mistake again."

The Eyre report, which is due to be published early in May, is believed to recommend that the Royal Opera Company should be privatised but the Royal Ballet, which currently enjoys critical acclaim - continue to be funded by the Arts Council. The ROH building would be funded directly by government as a receiving house for the two companies.

Covent Garden, page 9

Thousands ready to roll up for cannabis march

By Graham Ball

REPRESENTATIVES of Britain's leading drug-reform groups met last night to form a new front to fight the drug laws on the eve of the London cannabis march.

Danny Kushlick, director of the drug-policy group Transform said: "It is the first time all the different groups in Britain have agreed to combine in this way." The plan is for the new alliance to co-ordinate its activities to create maximum impact. "The three main areas of co-operation will be in lobbying MPs, building membership and working with the media," Mr Kushlick said.

The meeting held at the Quaker International Centre in Finsbury, was attended by more than 50 delegates. It was held last night because so many

representatives were in London for today's *Independent on Sunday* march in favour of the decriminalisation of cannabis which begins in Hyde Park at noon and goes on to a rally at Trafalgar Square. Thousands of people are expected to attend.

"We will discuss the possibility of fielding a candidate at a forthcoming European parliamentary election," Mr Kushlick said, "and organise a series of events all over Britain in June to raise awareness of the United Nations General Assembly special session on anti-drug policies". Groups represented at last night's meeting included Transform, Release, The Green Party, the Drug Policy Review Group, the CLICIA, UKCIA and the Scottish Campaign to Legalise Cannabis.

Why we march today, page 18

Cricket is best played in dark (it might even help Atherton)

RECENT form may suggest that the former England cricket captain Mike Atherton felt he was playing in the dark, but psychologists think he might have been a better player if he really had been.

Researchers have found that catching skills can be improved significantly by practising in a blacked-out room lit only by ultra-violet light.

The catcher sees nothing but the glowing ball and is not distracted by anything else in his or her field of vision.

As a result, say the researchers, attention is focused fully on the sources of information relevant to catching.

Dr Simon Bennett, from Manchester Metropolitan University, said subjects who took part in trials in which they were thrown 30 balls from a tennis machine improved their catch success rate from six to 22 after practising for

a number of sessions in conditions of interspersed light and dark.

When they practised only in the light they could not manage more than an average of 18 catches. Catching practise held only in the dark was not as successful as that held in alternate light/dark conditions, however.

Speaking at the British Psychological Society conference in Brighton Dr Bennett said: "One explanation for this phenomenon is that in normal light there's lots of information, much of which is distracting, such as the background arm movement and things picked up in the peripheral vision."

"By removing these sources of distraction you are directing the subject to the information relevant to improving his skill."

Conference reports, page 13

Today's news

Playgroup pledge

EVERY four-year-old is to have a school, nursery, or playgroup place this year, the Government said. Page 7

Stressed MPs

NEW MPs elected last May are showing high levels of stress which may hit their capacity to do the job, according to a survey. Page 13

Ferman to resign

JAMES FERMAN, director of the British Board of Film Classification, is to resign at the end of the year. Page 3

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Nursery place for every 4-year-old

By Judith Judd
Education Editor

EVERY four-year-old will have a school, nursery or playgroup place by this September, the Government announced yesterday. Ministers said that new plans worked out by local authorities, voluntary groups and private nurseries would provide more choice for parents.

But leaders of the playgroup movement said that the plans would mean most children were in big reception classes which were sometimes ill-equipped to cope with them, and playgroups would continue to close.

The scheme will provide 60,000 new places and involve between 300 and 400 new providers. Eighty per cent of places will be in state schools or nurseries and the rest in voluntary or private ones. Parents will be sent a list of providers and will be entitled to five two and a half-hour sessions a week at a cost of £1,100.

The money will pay for a full-time reception class place or a part-time state or private nursery place. Private nurseries will have to offer at least one free place. They will not be able to charge top-up fees for education but will be able to charge for childcare services, for example, if children are cared for early in the morning or in the evening.

A sum of £10m, announced in the budget, will be used to subsidise means-tested childcare at some nurseries. Parents will not be assured of a place at the school or nursery of their choice but ministers say that choice will be wide because, in every local authority, there are

more places than four-year-olds. Parents' options will vary according to where they live. In Middlesbrough, for instance, where most children already have state school or nursery places there will be few private or voluntary places.

Estelle Morris, the schools minister, said the new partnerships would end the destructive competition for children caused by the previous government's nursery voucher system which had driven some playgroups out of business. The Government would ensure, she said, that four-year-olds in reception classes received suitable education.

Every local authority which has four-year-olds in reception classes has had to show in its plan how their needs will be met. She acknowledged, however, that some still had some way to go. Traditionally, many reception classes have had fewer teachers per child than nursery classes and too little play space for younger children.

Margaret Lochrie, chief executive of the Pre-School Learning Alliance, said: "The Government's commitment to early years education is real but we are very concerned that most children are still going into reception classes at a time when people are asking whether five is too young to start school."

There was no sign that playgroup closures were slowing, she said. Karen Walker of the National Private Day Nurseries Association, said partnerships with local authorities were working well in some places, but said they were still concerned about the restriction of parental choice.

Councillors in porn inquiry

FOUR county councillors are under police investigation into the alleged misuse of a local authority's computers for pornography.

Shropshire County Council confirmed that West Mercia Police had executed search warrants at the homes of the four Labour councillors early on Wednesday.

A council spokesman said no one had been charged, but named three of the councillors being investigated as Peter Sayles, Ken Smith and Derek Woodvine.

A West Mercia police spokesman said: "During the early hours of Wednesday police officers in Shropshire executed search warrants at four addresses in connection with an inquiry into pornography.

"A quantity of property was recovered from addresses and will now be the subject of examination."

Police said that two men have been arrested in connection with the inquiry. They were interviewed at Shrews-

bury police station and released on police bail until June.

The council's Labour group leader, Malcolm Perks, said the three were named because they had been due to stand for places on council committees.

"In view of the on-going inquiries and in order to secure public confidence, the group will not be appointing them to any committee seats," Mr Perks said.

A council spokeswoman said the fourth councillor had not been named because he or she was not due to stand for a committee at yesterday's annual meeting.

The decision not to name the fourth councillor could be reviewed later, she added.

The council's chief executive, Nigel Pursey, said staff had acted very quickly to bring the matter to his attention.

The authority would now be reviewing its operational guidelines for the use of computer equipment by all staff and councillors.

Right to protect source is upheld

POLICE yesterday failed in an attempt to force a newspaper journalist to hand over details of the source of a story.

Norfolk Police asked Norwich Crown Court to force *Eastern Daily Press* reporter Adrian Galvin to hand over notes and other documents used for a story published last August about public funds allegedly being wasted on a four-year inquiry into allegations of corruption against three detectives. In the report Mr Galvin published the name of a police informant.

As a result of a police inquiry, two of the detectives were cleared of any wrongdoing. The third was cautioned by police for a minor breach

of disciplinary regulations and has now retired.

Judge Michael Hyam dismissed the application after a day-long hearing and ruled in favour of the *Eastern Daily Press*, which is based in Norwich, and Mr Galvin.

Police had argued that they needed Mr Galvin's notes to establish whether any offence under the Official Secrets Act had been committed by the person who supplied information for the story. They also argued that the report was in danger of undermining the police informant system.

Mr Galvin and the *Eastern Daily Press* had argued that it was vital for sources for newspaper stories to be protected.



Waiting for Godot: Cliff Richard fans queue outside the Albert Hall in London yesterday for tickets for concerts in the autumn that go on sale tomorrow. Photograph: Philip Meech

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Renaissance revisited at the touch of a button

Before travelling thousands of miles to see the works of a favourite artist, check the Internet, advises Matthew Hoffman. Lorenzo Lotto may never have intended his paintings to appear on screen – but now the modern art lover is well prepared to see the real thing

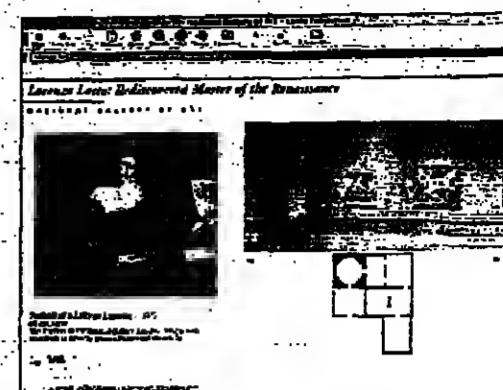
Do you, like me, find yourself reading reviews of exhibitions in New York, Milan and Paris that will never come to London? Up to now, the only remedy open to those of us who could not find the time, or money, to travel to distant cities in pursuit of fleeting assemblies of works by a favourite painter or movement has been to buy the catalogue – if even that could be found, in English and affordable. The other day, however, I happened upon an imaginative development that offers some solace to the stay-at-home art lover: the virtual tour.

I had been planning a trip to Washington DC, to be taken some time this spring, for reasons unconnected with art; but having read of an exhibition of the Italian Renaissance paintings of Lorenzo Lotto that had opened at the National Gallery there, I thought I would try to catch the show as well. But when would it close? And just which works would they be exhibiting?

Lotto was a recently acquired interest of mine. In the autumn of 1996, in the Correr Museum in Venice, I had come upon a small picture by Lotto of the Virgin enthroned, a little crown held over her head by two hovering angels. And although there were many more famous paintings in the Correr, something about the little Lotto captivated me. So I kept an eye out after that for other works by him.

One, in London's National Gallery, showed me that he could paint portraits with exquisite detail, and an altarpiece dedicated to Saint Antonine in the Church of Sant' Giovanni e Paolo, of two monks handing our alms to and receiving petitions from a highly realistic multitude, confirmed that he could work on a large scale as well. Then, last year, a book came out – *Lorenzo Lotto*, by Peter Humfrey, about the artist's life and works that helped feed my curiosity – and whet my appetite to see more of the paintings themselves.

What to do, then, about Washington? I turned



'A Lady with a Drawing of Lucretia' by Lorenzo Lotto, left. Above, as it appears on the Internet site: Photograph: The Bridgeman Art Library

The scale, for one, is important; you get no idea just what size the pictures are from reproductions on paper or screen, even when the measurements are given. Then there is the paint quality: the real works don't glow from behind as they do on a video screen, nor do they have the concentrated intensity of reduced versions on coated paper. To be frank, they are a little dull in comparison, but immeasurably more affecting, for all that.

My virtual tour did yield one unexpected benefit. As I approached the National Gallery, great billboard signs outside proclaimed "LOTTO", a bit as they do in New York City, where you are being hidden to play the local lottery. Inside, the hype continued: the show was subtitled "Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance" and you were told immediately and repeatedly that this great painter has been obscured by the popular acclaim accorded to Titian. In fact, Lotto is a very touching minor painter, at least by comparison with Titian, and his work is noted in every decent guide to the art of Venice.

Judging by a couple of conversations I had in Washington with others who had seen the Lotto show, they had been disappointed. But as anyone who had previously taken the Internet tour knew what to expect, presumably, like me, they were neither surprised nor disappointed to have failed to encounter the grandeur, sensuousness and cultural sophistication of another Titian. Lotto's works provide different satisfactions, not the less welcome for being in a lower register. The hype may mislead, but the virtual tour gives a truer impression of what's to be found on the walls of the gallery.

The Lotto virtual tour continues at www.nga.gov/exhibitions/lotto/virt.html. The real thing can be seen at the Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo, 2 April–28 June; and the Grand Palais, Paris, 12 October–11 January 1999.

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Everything in Garden is far from rosy



Behind the scenes: The Royal Ballet performing *Sleeping Beauty* at the Royal Opera House. Photograph: Laurie Lewis

NO ONE in the arts world could quite believe it. And yet no one could refrain from repeating the gossip. The new artistic director of the Royal Opera House is to be Sir Richard Eyre, the man appointed by the Government to conduct an independent review of the sorry mess in what was once the jewel in the British arts crown.

Surely it could not be true? Sir Richard is the man who is due to report soon on the future of opera and ballet in London. Could the result be a one-man employment creation scheme – a proposal of unique self-indulgence?

Anything seemed possible yesterday in the febrile world of the metropolitan arts at the end of a week which, even by the exaggerated standards of the ROH, was extraordinary.

Covent Garden had lost yet another chief executive. Mary Allen had, after only months in the job, gone the way of her predecessor Genista McIntosh, who lasted an even shorter time. In the past 12 months the ROH has sacked many of its most senior staff, seen its chairman and board replaced and been roundly chastised by a parliamentary select committee which strongly criticised Ms Allen over the manner of her move to Covent Garden from her post as secretary-general of the Arts Council, which funds the opera house. The then Arts Council chairman, Lord Gowrie, when asked why he had not blocked the move, mysteriously told the select

Paul Vallely reports on rumours swirling at the troubled ROH

committee that he had "bonded too closely" with the 46-year-old Brunette.

The ROH was yesterday taciturn about the rumours that Sir Richard was to take over. "That's something he'll have to consider when the post is advertised if he feels that is appropriate," a spokeswoman said.

The Department of Culture, Media and Sport was no more forthcoming. "It's not something we'd been involved with," said its spokeswoman, "and it's not something we'd

The man appointed to review opera and ballet in London is tipped to be Covent Garden's new artistic director

be commenting on." And at the Arts Council the response was: "it sounds like wild rumour ... or wishful thinking."

Yet it is hard to believe that Chris Smith, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, would not involve himself in such a decision. It was he who announced the review of the capital's opera provision without even consulting the Arts Council.

It was he who chose Sir Col in Southgate – the top man at EMI – to take over at Covent Garden to knock some busi-

ness sense into the dilettante opera clique. It was he who chose Gerry Robinson, the millionaire chairman of the Granada group, and a strong supporter of new Labour, to replace Lord Gowrie as chairman of the rudderless Arts Council which had so spectacularly failed to control the élite which one commentator disparagingly christened the Covent Garden crazy gang.

The arts establishment is alarmed enough by Mr Robinson, whom it has variously dubbed a "slash-and-burn

merchant" and "a shark in a Val Doonican pullover". Already Mr Robinson, who has announced his intention of working just one day a week, has instituted some Granada-style reforms, shrinking the council from 23 members to just 10. More recently, he announced that the nation's biggest arts companies were to be put on fixed-term contracts instead of being funded fairly automatically year after year.

It is in such a context that the rumours about Sir Richard receive their credence. When

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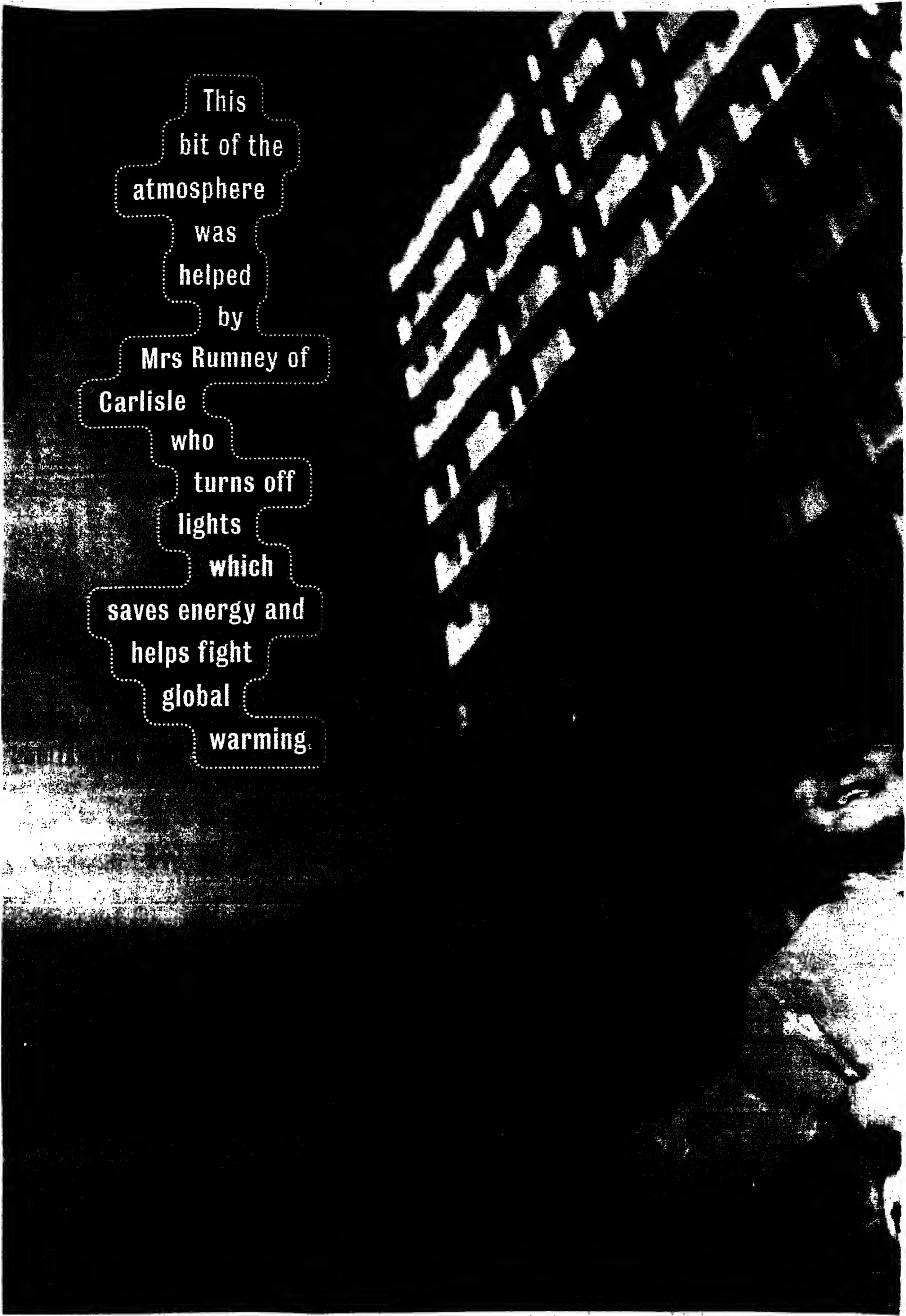
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Are they mad? Or are they simply politicians?

Jeremy Laurance
at the British Psychological Society conference reports on how Labour members are feeling the strain of power

NEW MPs elected last May are an unhappy bunch showing high levels of stress which may damage their capacity to do the job. New Labour has brought new misery to those on the Government benches who are more worried, anxious and depressed than opposition MPs.

A survey by psychologists from Manchester University showed that the psychological health of first time MPs after the election was worse overall than that of a matched group of candidates before the election. The new MPs, who were more likely to be suffering from low self-esteem, fatigue and illness.

Ashley Weinberg told the British Psychological Society's annual conference in Brighton that the job of MP ought to carry a Government health



Hot seat: As a Labour MP elected in May, Stephen Twigg may be finding life stressful – something senior colleagues such as Glenda Jackson, Tony Blair, Ben Bradshaw and Gordon Brown discovered long ago

warning. He said: "It is not because we feel sorry for them. It is because MPs are the most important decision-makers in the country. It would be doing the public an injustice if we do not give them the resources or ensure they are in the best psychological health to do the job."

Mr Weinberg said that the Labour landslide meant many candidates who never expected to win found themselves with a job they did not know how to do.

Over half complained there was no induction and some did not even know their way round the Commons. "They were told

here's a desk, here's a phone, get on with it."

The euphoria of winning may have been followed by anti-climax for many candidates. Some complained of a lack of sleep and said they found it difficult to switch off and 40 per cent protested at the lack of resources. "Undoubtedly

there were individuals whose expectations had been dashed," Mr Weinberg said.

The biggest pressure on new MPs was being thrust into the spotlight, having to juggle constituency and Commons work, and having to cope with separation from home and family.

The survey showed women

MPs, who were likely to have heavier home commitments, suffered more, as did those for both sexes aged 40-50.

"If you are in your forties you want to achieve something soon, your expectations are high and time is running out," said Mr Weinberg.

MPs who live between 50

and 100 miles from Westminster were coping better than those who lived closer or further away. Living closer meant greater involvement with the constituency while living further away meant longer travelling time. For MPs who had held senior positions outside the Commons, starting again at the

bottom of the ladder on the back benches could be a source of additional pressure.

Mr Weinberg cited a remark by Jack Cunningham, the Minister for Agriculture, about decisions being made by MPs in a state of "exhausted irrationality".

Leading article, page 20

Vitamin pills fail middle class children

MIDDLE-CLASS parents who give their children vitamin supplements in the hope of boosting their intelligence are wasting their time and money. Psychologists say that the supplements, which were bought by the boxful 10 years ago when reports appeared suggesting they could increase IQ, are only effective in children on poor diets, writes Jeremy Laurance.

Dr David Benton, of the department of psychology at Swansea University, who conducted the original study published in the *Lancet*, told the British Psychological Society conference that he was astonished by the reaction it provoked

after it was publicised on the BBC programme *QED*. "The *QED* programme succeeded in emptying the shelves of vitamins," he said. "Lorry loads were coming in from the continent to replenish them, giving the world the unfortunate impression that British children were malnourished."

His study had shown that giving a supplement of 18 vitamins and minerals to children aged 12 to 13 over eight months boosted their non-verbal intelligence – the capacity for abstract reasoning and problem solving – by nine IQ points. In five further studies, six showed a similar effect in all or

some children. Closer analysis showed the supplements only helped children with blood levels of vitamins below 70 per cent of recommended daily allowances (RDA).

"Most children in Britain are well nourished and don't need vitamin supplements ... There are a minority of children whose diet is poor enough to benefit from these supplements."

Dr Benton said there were good biological reasons why improved nutrition should boost non-verbal IQ, which is associated with larger brain size. As nutrition has improved over the last 50 years, it has been reflected in increased height,

larger brain size and rising IQ. In a separate paper, Richard Lynn, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Ulster University, told the conference intelligence had been rising by three IQ points a decade since the Thirties. "Improved diet is far and away the most important factor. We know brain size is a determinant of intelligence and it has increased in the last 60 years because of improved nutrition."

However, he said overall genetic intelligence had been declining because people lower down the social scale tended to have larger families while professional people had smaller ones. "The genetic component for higher intelligence is being passed on to fewer children," he said. This was reducing intelligence by one-half to two-thirds of an IQ point in each generation.

Professor Lynn was greeted by a handful of anti-Nazi protesters outside the conference who claimed his work was racist. He said that although environmental improvements in intelligence had outweighed the genetic deterioration, as nutrition improved to optimum levels it was possible that the genetic effects would result in a fall in intelligence in the future. There was no sign, however, that this had yet begun.

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Mandela gives Clinton lesson in friendship

By Mary Braid
in Cape Town

PRESIDENT Bill Clinton kept on smiling. But he must have been squirming as President Nelson Mandela, standing beside him, told the world South Africa would not be bullied into abandoning its Iranian, Libyan and Cuban allies, enemies of the United States.

Mr Mandela, 79, growing stiff, had to lean on Mr Clinton as they walked to the joint press conference at Tuynhuys, his Cape Town residence. But he needed no support from Mr Clinton when it came to foreign policy. Cuba's Fidel Castro and Iran's former president Hashemi Rafsanjani were among the first heads of state invited to the new South Africa, said Mr Mandela. "I have also invited [Muammar] Gaddafi ... because moral authority dictates that we should not abandon those who helped us in the darkest hour."

Some say Mr Mandela's great failing is blind loyalty. But yesterday he said South Africans who criticised him for it could "go jump in a pool". It was clear he felt there was room in the water for the Americans.

If Mr Clinton was looking to smooth over policy differences, Mr Mandela, was working from a different script. He praised Mr

Clinton for having the "right instincts". Mr Clinton had been a friend of South Africa before he became president and his visit was the "high watermark" of the Mandela government's first term. But Mr Mandela dismissed the US's new "trade not aid" approach to Africa and the related African Growth and Opportunity Bill. Mr Clinton insists the legislation will increase African nations' access to the American economy but South Africa believes the continent's economies will suffer in the proposed new trade relationships with the rich US, and that aid will be cut.

President Clinton's pledge that a new era of equal partnership was being started between Africa and the US was tested by what appeared like a lecture. Mr Mandela turned Mr Clinton's admiration of the South African "miracle" to his advantage. The US, he said, could sit down with its enemies – as the ANC had done with the old apartheid leaders – and talk peace. "I have no doubt that the role of the United States as the world leader would be tremendously enhanced," said Mr Mandela.

Mr Clinton did not respond to Mr Mandela's lecture, preferring to praise him for the huge part he had played in the



Foreign aid: President Clinton lending President Mandela a hand yesterday on the steps at Tuynhuys, his Cape Town residence

Photograph: AFP

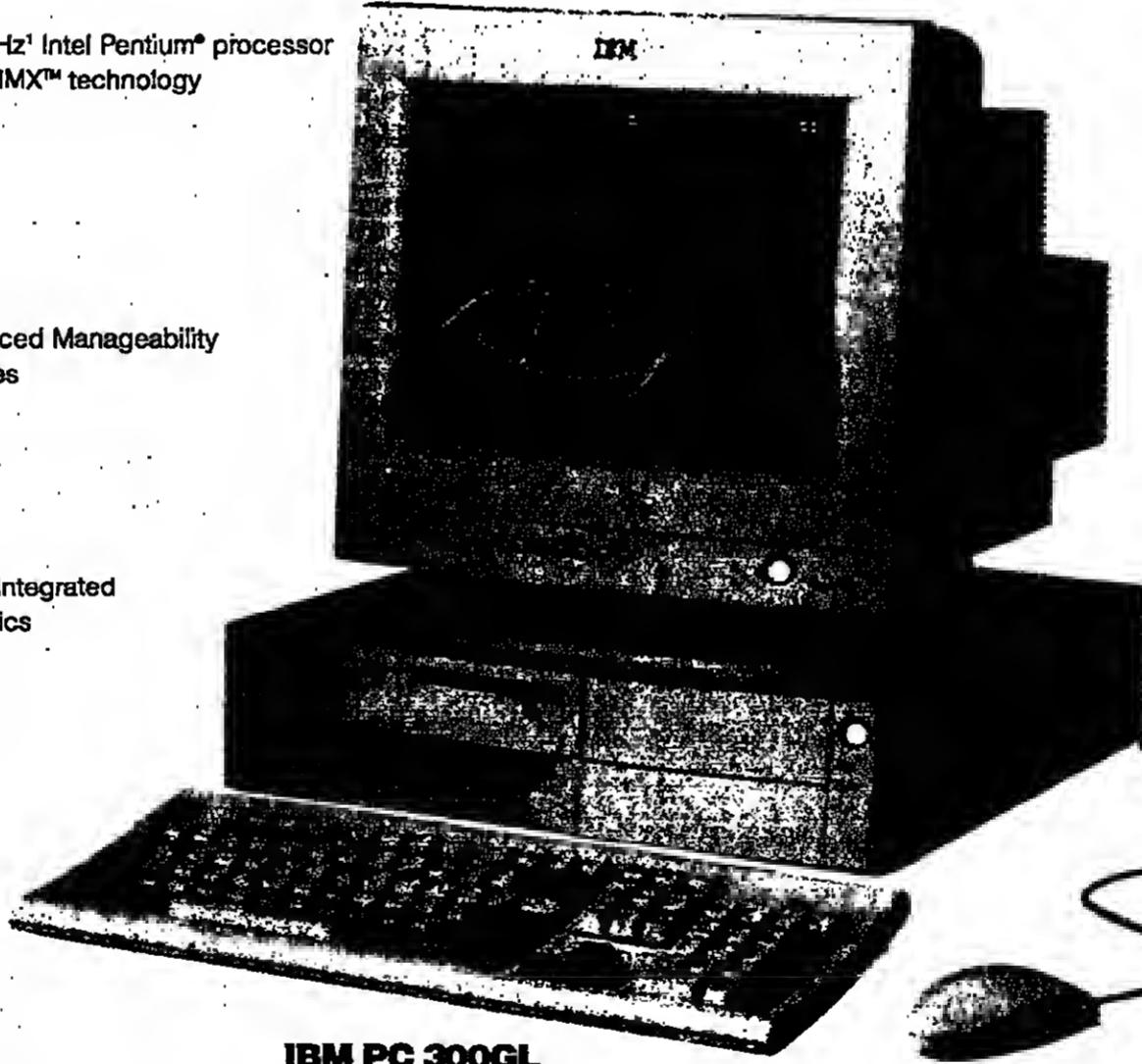
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Fears grow for refugees in camp riots

By Richard Lloyd Partry
in Jakarta

THE United Nations joined human rights organisations in demanding access to Malaysian detention camps yesterday after a battle between police and illegal immigrants from Indonesia on Thursday which left at least nine people dead.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees expressed concern that some of the Indonesians facing deportation might be political refugees fleeing persecution. "Yesterday we sent a letter to the Malaysian authorities expressing concern about what happened in the detention centre and again pointing out that UNHCR needed access to those people," said a spokesman in Geneva.

Amnesty International issued a statement questioning the force used by the Malaysian police and urged an independent inquiry. "The deaths of eight Indonesians in a repatriation operation in the early hours of this morning raise serious questions about the process," it said.

Eight Indonesians and one Malaysian policeman were killed in a riot at the Semenyan detention camp, 25 miles outside the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. About 100 inmates

Father defends boy in school massacre

THE DISTRAUGHT father of one of the two boys accused of firing on classmates outside their school in Jonesboro last Tuesday, Arkansas, said yesterday that he was as perplexed as anyone about what happened and that the boy was sorry, writes David Usborne in New York.

In interviews on two television networks, Scott Johnson defended 13-year-old Mitchell. "My son is not a monster," he said. Mr Johnson, a lorry driver of Minnesota who is divorced from the boy's mother, offered condolences to the five victims – four girls and a teacher from Westside Middle School.

Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, 11, were charged with murder on Wednesday. Funerals of two of the girls, Paige Ann Herring, 12, and Natalie Brooks, 11, were held yesterday. Struggling to contain his

Swiss Holocaust deal puts pressure on UK

By Louise Jury



PLANS from Swiss banks for a global settlement of claims by Holocaust survivors put pressure on the British government yesterday to make similar restitution.

The Swiss banks agreed on Thursday to negotiate the settlement after talks with Stuart Eizenstat, the American Under-Secretary of State, lawyers who have launched multi-million dollar claims against the banks and with the World Jewish Congress.

The meeting followed threats from US states and cities to boycott the banks for obstructing Holocaust survivors' efforts to recover assets placed in accounts in Switzerland before or during the Second World War. Mr Eizenstat has suggested that all the plaintiffs whose money and other assets were held by Switzerland should receive a payment from a "rough-justice fund," though the exact billion-dollar figure is still to be established.

The proposal was cautiously

welcomed and in Britain the Holocaust Educational Trust claimed it would set a precedent which the British government should observe.

The Government is due to publish next week a report into its war-time trading with the Enemy Act which gave Britain control over money and assets deposited in its banks by people living in Germany, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.

Some of these people were Jews who placed their valuables

in Britain because it was a safe haven, but then found it difficult to reclaim them after the war. Some died in the concentration camps, taking any proof of ownership with them and making it impossible for families to claim.

Lord Jaeger, chairman of the Holocaust Educational Trust, has called on the Government to compensate those who lost money invested in British banks in this way. He fears it will refuse. Some officials believe that the question of assets was settled in end-of-war negotiations, but Lord Jaeger believes the final agreements were unfair: "I hope the Government will look at what's happened over the Swiss banks and change their minds before Britain runs into a barrage of ignominy."

However, there was some evidence yesterday that the settlement proposed in New York was unlikely to keep all sides happy. The Swiss Bankers' Association said it was concerned that the American local government officials had not completely lifted the threat of

sanctions against the banks. And a Jewish leader in Israel, Avraham Burg, dismissed the global offer as a public relations ploy. "The only settlement we can accept is one that we can take to the survivors," he said.

The Swiss government was at pains to point out that the three banks involved, Credit Suisse, the Union Bank of Switzerland and the Swiss Bank Corp, were acting alone. It has set up its own procedure to investigate the banks' activities, the Volcker commission, and that would continue. Accountants are studying bank accounts which have lain dormant since the war.

Alan Hevesi, the New York City financial controller who led the talks, said the participants will meet again on 24 April and he expected a final deal could be worked out within 90 days of that session. Mr Hevesi heads a panel representing 800 financial officers of state and municipal governments in the US whose potential financial might had seriously alarmed the Swiss banks.

A84° 3473

Ferdinand "Ferry" Porsche, the founder of the German sports car marque, has died aged 88. He is pictured here with his father, also Ferdinand, in 1950 with an early 356. Ferry Porsche, born in Austria, worked in his father's Stuttgart factory, which produced the Nazi-inspired VW Beetle.

Photograph: AP



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Bordering on frustration

THE real symbol of the Middle East is not the palm tree or camel but the checkpoint. Some consist of a few armed men and a jeep beside the road. Others are more like medieval fortresses. All of them make travelling in the region a misery. I have come recently to detest the Allenby bridge crossing, which spans the Jordan on the road between Amman and Jerusalem.

A Franciscan with whom I spent hours trying to cross told me that before Israel captured the West Bank in 1967 he took an hour and a quarter to drive between the two cities; now it takes six. I have used the Allenby twice in the past month, both times coming from Amman. The first time I just missed the bus which ferries you from the last Jordanian checkpoint to the first Israeli post. I waited for another. It came after an hour but the driver disappeared for a meal. On his return he pointed out that there were only two passengers and waited another 45 minutes for more to arrive.

The second time, I just caught the bus. We crossed the Jordan. On the Israeli side the second guard post seemed unmaned. Finally we got to the main checkpoint complex. The man on the X-ray machine became suspicious of my laptop, which was taken away for examination. Passport control was swift. But the only quick way back to Jerusalem is by Palestinian taxi and they seemed strangely absent. "They are all on strike," said a policewoman. Israel had just raised the tariff they have to pay. The only alternative was a bus of elephantic slowness to Jericho, from where I got to Jerusalem five hours after I started.

The government gives the impression it is all good hearted stuff and an interesting cultural tradition, like Morris dancing. Captives are generally not harmed and are invited to tribal feasts, but it is not benign as all that. The driver of a German scholar was shot dead by an armed band when they tried to kidnap her. And, despite the overt demands for better social services, the government says the pay-off is usually money and a four-wheel drive car.

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JERUSALEM DIARY



Patrick Cockburn

bee-keepers. Police came to inspect their hives, during which they released the bees. The tribe wanted compensation and, to make sure that their grievance got a hearing, kidnapped the Chinese.

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I HAVE been having trouble with my computer, which has developed a fondness for the letter "N", inserting it in all possible occasions. Experts have come and gone: "There is no cure," they murmured as they took their fees. A new computer is on order, but meantime I have been phoning my copy to the Independent, where it is courteously and accurately recorded by the copytakers.

Nevertheless, a nameless dread persists. What if I sniff while spelling the name of the head of Iraq's secret police? God knows what will appear in print.

A colleague reminded of a Guardian critic who phoned a copy from the opera house. Once he wished to describe Maria Callas in Tosca as sounding like "a tigress calling for her whelps", only to find the last word changed to "whelks".

WHEN I visited Yemen last year, a Briton was kidnapped by a mountain tribe as I arrived. Usually kidnappers there produce socially acceptable reasons they want better water, roads or schools. But recently a tribe kidnapped a Chinese engineer for a unique reason. The tribe are

the secret police? God

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Once he wished to describe

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Girls snared by the Net

They're not interested in violent computer games, says Jack O'Sullivan, but they know it's good to talk on-line

I'M being told a great adventure story by an 11 year old girl. "OK, there are these two kids exploring a cave," she explains breathlessly. "Then the girl drops down a hole and the man has to save her. There are rats and bats and piranhas which he has to get past to reach her. And there's a detonator that you have to blow up." My narrator knows her story well, because it's a game she has played for months on her home computer. And she is proud of her abilities - the girl is always saved. But her story-telling is tinged with disappointment. "I play the man because the girl doesn't really have a role. I sometimes wish that the man got lost instead and the girl had to find him. It would be better."

The speaker is Udy Onochie, 11, from Peckham Park Primary School in south London. Her tale is typical of a medium whose technology may be a modern, but which got stuck culturally somewhere around the early James Bond films.

"It's not fair," adds Udy's friend Wumi Oti, 10. "I've got a game where this man is being attacked by crabs. If you don't shoot them, they crawl over your face and then you die."

Yet, despite these changes, most big games' manufacturers

But they should put a woman in instead of a man." Naomi Gordon, 10, nods in agreement: "It's really sad, because girls like playing girls and girls can be explorers just like boys."

So what is the games world doing to assuage this discontent? Not much. *Barbie* computer games have recently been targeted at six to eight year olds, but they are sneered at by my older interviewees. Then there is Lara Croft, star of *Tomb Raider*, the adventure story of a female explorer. She plays a James Bond character in a D-cup, an action Barbie babe for fevered male imaginations. (She still has more male than female players). Nonetheless, when she pulls out her M16 and Uzi to kill a few wolves, many girls are thrilled to see a heroine protecting herself with not a male rescuer in sight. New products created by Girl Games have also tried to lure girls on to computers with games such as how to win a date with your perfect guy. Additionally, a new company called Purple Moon is marketing "girls adventure" software, with plots dealing with social and emotional issues.

Some do girls bother? For many it's just about fun - if the boy's game is the only one in town, they will play it. But for others it's almost a feminist statement, not that they would

remain wedded to macho beef pest its sell-by date. So girls still struggle with a medium in which they are often represented as passive. They have to be extraordinarily resourceful, says Kate Baggott, a youth media analyst at the New Paradigm Learning Corporation. "Girls have to go through mental gymnastics to change the victim position of the females who are being rescued and decrease the heroic proportions of the male characters. So they'll say I'm sleeping, but he works for me and I'm controlling him through telepathy to get him through all those barriers."

So why do girls bother? For many it's just about fun - if the boy's game is the only one in town, they will play it. But for others it's almost a feminist statement, not that they would

use that phrase. "We like acting boyish and independent," says Wumi. "We want to be loud and bold, instead of being girly and quiet and shy." At which point she goes into raptures about fight games. "I like where you have two different people fighting each other and you have lots of different weapons to kill with." In short, girls want to prove to the boys that they can achieve in their terms.

Some of the other girls talk about how the staple male diet of computer games often leaves them cold. Here's Ayse on car racing games: "All you do is race and go through tunnels. It's so boring."

The girls also have to fight to get time on the computer.

"My brother has action man games," says Jade Whitlock-Kent, 10. "I think it's quite

good, but when my brother comes back in the room he says, 'Stop, it's only for boys'. I just walk away and watch TV or do my homework." And that's the danger - that girls will just walk away. The failure of games

sioned. "My friends are less interested now that they were a few years ago. When you were younger you did things the boys did, like play football, because otherwise the boys would tease you and say you couldn't

watch a film rather than play computer games that can be very repetitive."

So is this the future - girls finally turned off computer entertainment because Barbie and Lara Croft are not interesting enough? Perhaps not. A new book, *Growing Up Digital - the Rise of the Net Generation* (McGraw-Hill) by Don Tapscott, suggests that girls are in fact poised to reverse the domination of computers by their male founders. "The computer," he says, "is changing from being a personal stand alone device for information management into becoming a communications medium, which suits girls at an earlier stage of life than boys." He is talking, in short, about on-line computers, e-mail, the internet and the capacity that comput-

ers now have for fostering co-operation and not simply competition. Once girls can have access to the Internet they will, Tapscott says, be free of the male-orientated games to which they are currently subjected.

The evidence in north America is, says Baggott, that girls are not walking away from computers, just dumping the old-style games in favour of playing on-line. But that's easy there because local telephone calls are free, making on-line gaming cheap. The moral for British parents is that if you want your daughters to be computer literate like your sons you have to make sure the girls get equal time on the terminal. And then you must swallow the cost of plugging your home computer into a telephone line.



I want my CD-Rom: Youngsters at Peckham Park Primary School in London. They look forward to computers than macho 'shoot-em-ups'

Photograph: Nicola Kurtz

For your daughter to be computer literate like your son, you have to make sure girls get equal time on-line

suppliers to meet female needs runs the risk of putting them off the most important technology of the next century.

Elizabeth McGrath, 15, from Oxford is typical of how older girls become disillusioned.

do it. But when you're older you don't have to prove yourself so much like that. Also taste changes. I think my friends feel that they need more stimulation than a computer game can offer. A lot will read or

watch a film rather than play computer games that can be very repetitive."

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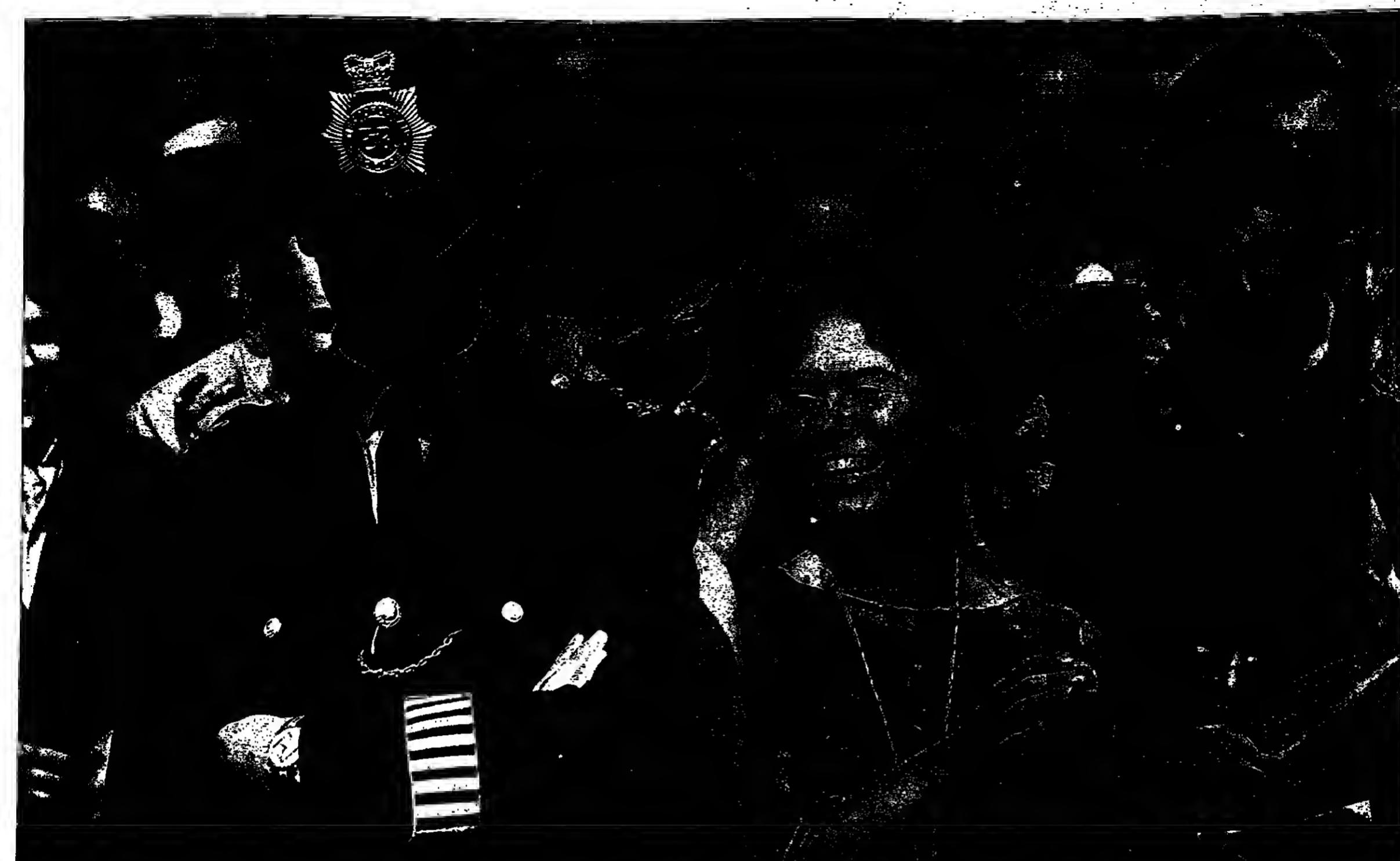
Lean, mean fashion for the body-conscious

Plus

■ The pirates off Penzance - are the Spanish stealing our fish?

■ Decriminalise cannabis - full coverage of today's big protest march in London

Why we're marching today



The 'Legalise Cannabis' rally, Hyde Park 1967. Times have changed, but the law hasn't.

Photograph: MSI

TODAY, for the first time in 30 years, the streets of London will be thronged with people who want the freedom to smoke cannabis without fear of arrest.

The reason they are there is due to a campaign begun six months ago by our sister paper, the *Independent on Sunday*, which has attracted support from thousands of readers, as well as doctors, politicians, and people from the worlds of business and the arts.

The paper's editor, Rosie Boycott, opened the campaign by disregarding the hypocrisy that has traditionally surrounded this subject to write frankly about her own experiences. "I rolled my first joint on a hot June day in Hyde Park in the summer of 1968. Just 17 and desperate to be grown-up. Since my first joint, I have smoked a good many more, although I hardly smoke at all nowadays. The habit has given up on me. But I don't see why people who share my earlier enthusiasm should be branded as criminal."

"The truth is that most people I know have smoked at some time or other in their lives. They hold down jobs, bring up their families, run major companies, govern our

Last September, the *Independent on Sunday* called for the decriminalisation of cannabis. Today, thousands will be in London to add their support. Graham Ball recalls how the campaign took off

country, and yet, after 30 years cannabis is still officially regarded as a dangerous drug," she wrote.

Last September, the honeymoon period enjoyed by the new Labour Government was coming to a close. It had become clear by then that on the issue of drug law reform the new Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was happy to endorse the same hard-line policies of his predecessor, Michael Howard.

Rosie Boycott's decision to "out" herself struck a chord with those who had hoped for a more radical approach from new Labour. "I quickly realised that I was pushing against an open door. There are plenty of people, like me, believe it is high time we adopted a more sensible approach to cannabis," she said this week.

Lord Bingham of Cornhill, the Lord Chief Justice, made it clear that while he was not expressing a personal view on decriminalisation, it was an issue that deserved consideration. "It is a subject that deserves, in my judgment, detached, objective, independent consideration," he said.

Many reformers saw this statement as a deliberate riposte to Jack Straw's earlier announcement not to grant a Royal Commission of Inquiry

into the working of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act which prohibits the use of cannabis.

In the same month an opinion poll commissioned by the *ios* revealed that 80 per cent of people wanted the current laws relaxed and that more than one third wanted the immediate decriminalisation of cannabis for recreational purposes.

In November, the medical side of the argument was significantly advanced by the British Medical Association's decision to publish an 80-page review which overturned

the old assumption that cannabis was a drug with no therapeutic benefits. Demands for doctors to be allowed to prescribe cannabis as a medicine had been growing for more than a decade. Strong anecdotal evidence had suggested it was good for treating muscle spasticity connected to Multiple Sclerosis, anaesthesia, some forms of epilepsy, glaucoma, asthma and hypertension.

The influential BMA urged the Government to "consider changing the Misuse of Drugs Act to allow the prescription of cannabinoids (active chemical compounds in cannabis) to patients with certain conditions causing distress that are not adequately controlled by existing treatments."

They went further and recommended that "while research is underway, the police, the courts and other prosecuting authorities should be made aware of the medical reasons for the unlawful use of cannabis by those suffering from certain medical conditions for whom other drugs have proved ineffective".

Whilst the Government has turned a deaf ear to the report, there is evidence that the magistrates have responded.

The *ios* campaign consistently revealed cases where individuals suffering from crippling disease had been convicted or sent to prison for using cannabis to ease their pain. Following the BMA report, some courts took a more lenient approach in line with their recommendations and issued admonishments and lighter fines to invalids in the dock.

The case for applying the criminal law to protect public health suffered another setback with the leaking of a World Health Organisation report in February. The report, that had been suppressed by officials, contained analysis by an expert panel of scientists, which determined that long-term use of cannabis was less harmful than alcohol or tobacco. The magazine *New Scientist*, which broke the story, said: "Politicians will just have to bite the bullet - cannabis will have to be decriminalised."

However, the one event to make most impact on the campaign came from the least likely source. On Saturday 13 December, a young woman bought a small amount of cannabis from a young man in a London pub. An unremarkable event, commonplace even. Except that young man with the £10 deal was William Straw, son of the more famous Jack. The issue of the 17-year-old's identity loomed over the whole of last Christmas, until early in the New

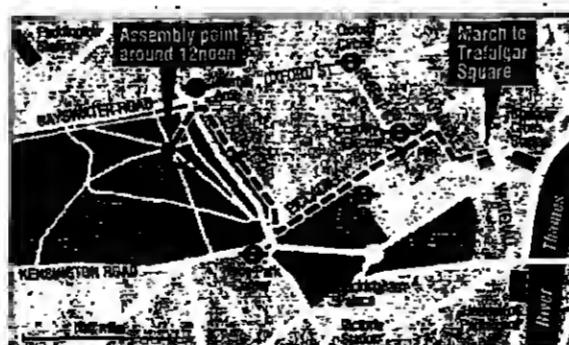
Year it was revealed that the Home Secretary had turned in his son and expected him to face the consequences.

In the end, he got off with a caution, and the woman who set the deal up, a reporter from the *Daily Mirror*, was accused of entrapment.

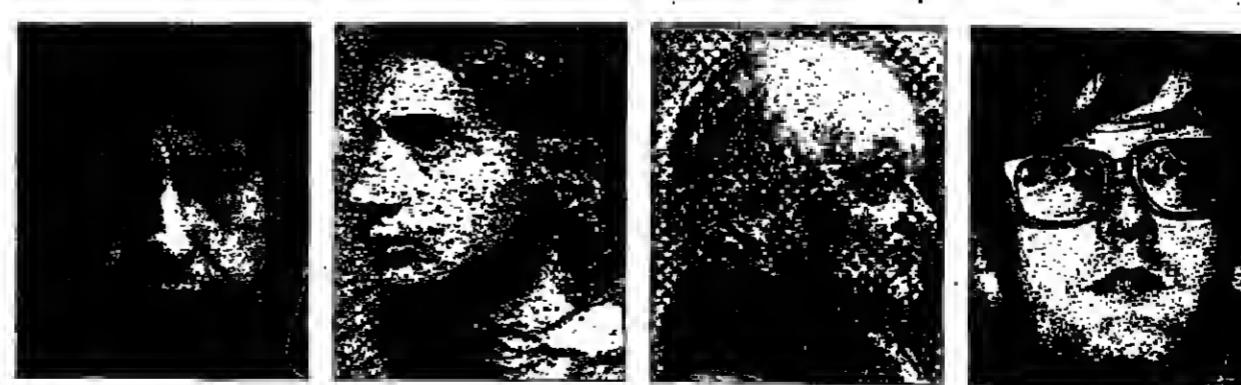
The incident proved embarrassing for the Government, although the Prime Minister was quick to give his minister his full support, and proved once and for all that cannabis use is more widespread than even the most fervent advocate had suspected.

And so we come to the march. After six months of debating the case in print, it was clearly time to turn words into action. Throughout the campaign, the involvement and support of readers has been vital. The passions raised by the question of cannabis decriminalisation run deep.

It was agreed that the best way to harness the energy and enthusiasm of those who have so eagerly supported the campaign was to invite them to "stand up and be counted". And by 4pm this afternoon, those who march will have earned their place in the history of the struggle to decriminalise cannabis.



Word wizards: The lyrics of (from left) Bob Dylan, John Keats, William Blake and Jarvis Cocker inspire admiration across many generations



The lines they are a changin' as pop turns into poetry

Dylan vs Keats, Cocker vs Coleridge – Jack O'Sullivan finds poets praising the lyrical virtuosity of the rock star

WILLIAM BLAKE would have had no problem with the Culture Secretary Chris Smith placing Bob Dylan alongside Keats in poetry's hall of fame as an equally talented writer. After all, Blake used to sing his "Songs of Innocence and Experience" – and Van Morrison has set several of his works to music. Nor, perhaps, would Robert Burns be bothered by the Culture Secretary's rankings. "My Love is Like A Red, Red Rose" is as beautiful sung as it is recited. Go back to Homer and you find it difficult to distinguish lyricist from poet.

Yet most poets see themselves as practising a very different art from their rhythmic cousins. They are slightly appalled at attempts to place them in the same league. "When you are writing a poem, you are setting it to music at the same time," explains Don Paterson, winner of this year's TS Eliot prize. "You are trying to speak musically. In contrast, the skill of lyric writing is in leaving space for the music. Most poets are bad at that because

they want to fill all the parts."

Michael Donaghay, the American-born poet, is more emphatic. "Robert Lowell said in 1959 of the lesser beat poets that their poetry sounded like an unscathed libretto. That's how I feel about reading pop lyrics that pass themselves off as poetry. Bob Dylan is great supported by his band, his guitar and the rasp of his voice, but the effect of reading his lyrics on the page is like getting a ten minute self-indulgent electric guitar solo without the bass and drums. With Keats you get the bass and drums. Everything is

there on the page. A great poet puts it all there for you to unlock with your mind's ear."

It's a division that Adrian Mitchell, the performing poet and playwright, cannot accept. He highlights the long history of poets/lyricists not only here but in Europe, notably Jacques Prevert's work for Forties' French cabaret and Brecht's lyric writing for the German theatre.

"I am against the erection of a Berlin Wall between lyrics and poetry. I am interested in what is good and bad, what is empty and what is full of gold."

Yet, regardless of this debate, poets are moved and inspired by pop lyricists. Their obliqueness is particularly valued. "I learn when they approach a problem from an odd, creative angle," says Ruth Padel, who likes singer-songwriters, such as Laurie Anderson, Tori Amos, Michelle Shocked and Tracey Chapman. That same word "oblique" crops up again with Paul Farley, the up and coming poet, whose first collection, "The Boy From the Chemist Is Here To See You" has just been published. "An oblique ap-

proach appeals to the poet because you have the whole concept of the word carrying great weight and the sound of it meaning more than what the word signifies."

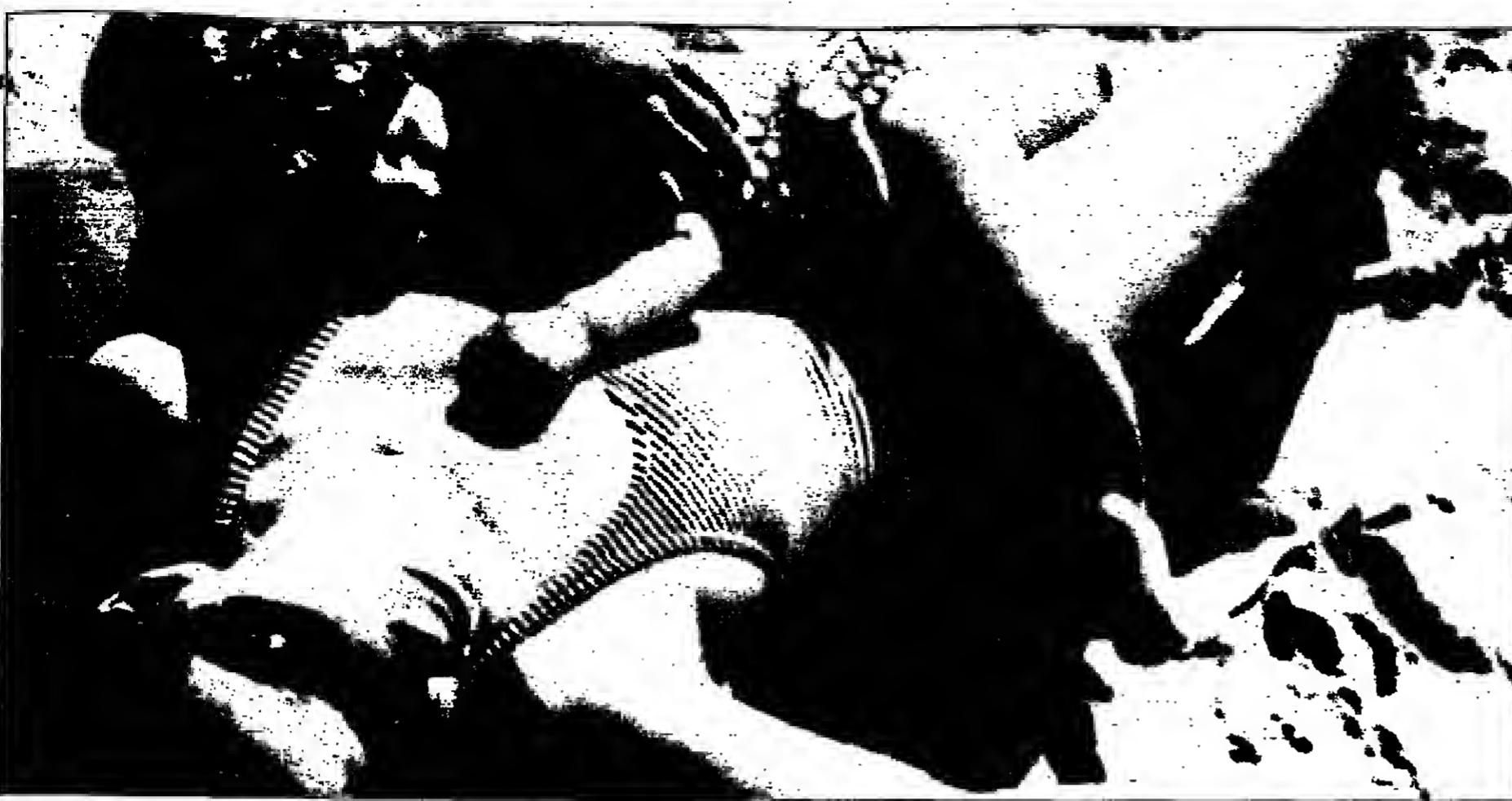
So who are the poets' favourite lyricists? The usual suspects litter their lists: Lennon, McCartney and, of course, Dylan, Jarvis Cocker, full of irony, ranks high.

"Common People" is a great piece of shit stirring about middle class people slumming it," says Paul Farley, who also rates Alex Chilton from Big Star. And Elvis Costello scores con-

sistently high – "lyrics you can listen to again and again," says Adrian Mitchell, who is currently compiling an anthology for teenagers including works by McCartney and Chuck Berry.

When asked to give his views on the great debate sparked by Chris Smith's comments, Mitchell inevitably came up with a short poem, entitled "The Hamburgerisation of Poetry":

*My wife Celia said:
Don't say anything stupid.
Just say: Keats and Bob Dylan
- They both died young.*

Big draw: The eerie French short feature *Regarde la Mer* prompted strong reactions from audiences

When selling out is not a sell-out

The London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival has been the most successful ever, attracting 'straight' film fans alongside its core audience. Mel Steel picks out the highlights.

"WE ALWAYS have such a dismal Christmas," says Briony Hanson, co-programmer, along with Robin Baker, of the London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival. "We do most of the programming in two bedrooms over the holidays, wading through tapes and talking on the phone, which is hardly ideal. We find what we think are some real gems, but we've really no idea of how it's all going to look projected on a big screen in front of an audience."

They needn't have worried. This year's festival has been the busiest and most successful ever, characterised by sell-out screenings, punters being turned away, and three times more press coverage than last year. Even before the final take is tallied up, it's clear that last year's 25 per cent leap on previous was no fluke.

It's a vote of confidence for a potentially risky change in programming strategy. Mixed programming in the shorts selections has proved a successful and long overdue move, with many of the programmes offering queer treasures for boys, girls and everyone in between. Equally welcome has been this

year's international emphasis, particularly in the boys' camp, with a Taiwanese retrospective and offerings from Guinea, China, the Philippines and India replacing the usual US-heavy fare. The Taiwanese programme, in particular, has had a "staggering" response.

The boys have definitely had more of a challenge and they lapped it up

and triggered debate in the after-show discussions. "The boys have definitely had more of a challenge," says Hanson, "and they've lapped it up."

The highlights have been many. *The Man In Her Life* (Ang Lakuk Si Buah Ni Selya, Carlos Siguin Reyna, Philippines, 1997), a camp, sexy and Sirkian Filipino melodrama, is clearly destined for cult status. *Love and Death on Long Island* (Richard Kwietniowski, UK/Canada 1997), adapted from

Gilbert Adair's novel, was a last-minute addition to the programme and a big hit. Kwietniowski's first feature-length offering, a simple and beautifully-made story about an older man (John Hurt) infatuated by a younger starlet (Jason Priestley), *I Think We Do* (Brian Sloane, USA 1997), another last-minute addition, and *Broadway Damage* (Victor Mignati, USA 1997), both independents, have also gone down well, featuring good stars and good scripts without too many challenges. And *The Hanging Garden* (Thom Fitzgerald, Canada 1997), the festival's opening night gala offering, happily managed to live up to its hype. A feel-good movie "for anyone who was ever young", it will almost certainly appeal to a straight mainstream as well as gay audience – which, let's face it, remains the marker of success in a still queen-hostile economic market.

What's been notable in the girls' department this time around is the sheer volume of lesbian dramas: 11 in total, of which only five are US imports. "There was time," reflects Hanson, "when *Desert Hearts*, *Clave of the Moon*, and even *Go*



Fish had to satisfy the whole lesbian audience.

This year we've been able to jump around a lot more, from *Slaves to the Underground* (Kristine Peterson, USA 1996), a kind of grunge-riot fantasy, to the more predictable *Entwined* (Raquel Cecilia Harrington, USA 1997). *Entwined*, though I hate to say it, is another movie probably destined for cult status, at least among devotees of glossy, schlocky, un-

naturally-coiffed lesbian romance. Elsewhere, *Spice Girls*, a stylish, extremely popular collection of shorts, looks like providing a strong contender for the C4 TX Prize. And *Regarde la Mer* (Francois Ozon, France 1997), Hanson's own favourite featurette, has drawn strong reactions from audiences as what begins as a gentle, romantic holiday video builds to an eerie, disturbing climax.

Closing act: A tale of a time-travel love affair, *The Sticky Fingers of Time*, an independent production, closed the festival

Other dyke highlights have included leshian-at-a-bus-stop movie *Les Voleurs* (Andre Techine, France 1996), featuring Catherine Deneuve in unquintessential passion for a young philosophy student; and rockumentary-with-a-difference *The Cream Will Rise* (Gigi Gastoo, USA 1997), which, after a predictable beginning, metamorphoses into a transfixing and moving confession from "omniscient" dyko Sophie B Hawkins. The husky-voiced one also made a live guest appearance at the festival, entirely unexpected by the awed audience.

The reception for kd lang's *Live in Sydney* (Caz Gorham and Frances Dickenson, UK 1997) preview made it clear that this dyko's days aren't over yet.

Hanson was nervous about how audiences would react to the closing night offering. This was *The Sticky Fingers of Time* (Hilary Brougher, USA 1997), a time-travel movie with a twist, which focuses on the relationship between Fifties pulp fiction writer Tucker Hardin and Nineties failed suicide Drew.

"Lesbians can be so literal" says Hanson. "But then, they've surprised me all the way through this festival. I've been kind of inspired."

This miscast Misanthrope needs a change of heart

AGEISM is certainly not a crime you'd want to pin on Peter Hall. Often at his productions, you wonder whether you're watching a play or a pension scheme. Alan Howard's Lear, for example, must have been all of five when he sired his eldest daughter, so formidably mature did she seem in the recent Hall staging. And is Felicity Kendall anybody's idea, these days, of the viciously careerist high-class tart Hall had her play in Feydeau's *Mind My Love For Me*?

You have to applaud this director's loyalty: he seems determined, for instance, to get Dulcie Gray and Michael Denison (the F R and Queenie Lewis of showbiz) into the *Guinness Book of Records* for length of service to an insatiable public. But such is his penchant for casting out-of-tiler, generation-wise, you feel that if we were to direct a real oldies' knees-up, Kander and Ebb's *70 Girls*, say – it would have to be performed via a ouija board. All of which is to say that it's very much not a first that Elaine Paige is so unconvincingly cast as Celimene in Hall's new staging of *The Misanthrope*. Imagine replacing John Malkovich with Barry Manilow in *Dangerous Liaisons* and you'll get some sense of the mismatch between Molière's manipulative, sexually-sophisticated – and spiritually empty – coquette from the Sun King's France, and the nice, warm, down-to-earth and endlessly ordinary Ms Paige.

Just about the only salvo you could imagine this performer gracing is a beauty salon. The role is vital in shaping our perception of Alceste, the title character. How can we take quite seriously his pose as the looe champion of honesty, and the snarlingly disinterested scourge of hypocrisy when he's infatuated with a woman he knows to be a walking symbol of twisted social values? Michael Peonigian has the right kind of thin curled smile and sickly superiority for Alceste, but his passion seems to stem from no lower than his throat. A satirist who cannot see

Paige, dressed up, looks like a cross between Ronnie Corbett and Danny La Rue

sion, set in De Gaulle's Paris, to Martin Crimp's more recent adaptation, set amidst the mad glitterati of the present day, productions of *The Misanthrope* have been keen to stress the timelessness and topicality of its war between the worldly and the unworldly, extremism and accommodation. There can be snags with this (in the modern world, if you attacked the equivalent of a crappily courtly versifier, you'd be met with acclaim rather than the threat of arrest). But you also risk over-reducing Molière's cast to a collection of theatrical types when you set it in as bare and textureless a 17th-century milieu as Hall achieves here. At the start, an actor in a suo mask moans at us: by the end, you feel like returning the compliment.

Paul Taylor

Drag: Elaine Page (left) as Celimene and Anna Carteret as Arsinée in *The Misanthrope* Geraint Lewis

THE WEEK IN THE ARTS

DAVID LISTER

IT'S 4 A.M. and you're desperate to get to sleep, but all you can hear is "We don't need no education" followed by *Dark Side Of The Moon* and just as you're finally drifting off it's Atom bloody Heart Mother wailing its way up the stairs. It could drive a woman to divorce. And I regret to report it has.

For behind the exhibition by 35-year-old Steve Geary of paintings based on Pink Floyd albums, which runs until tonight at the Air Gallery in Dover Street, London, there is a sad story of marital disharmony and an inspiring story of devotion to art, depending on which way you look at it.

Geary tells me that it was necessary for inspiration to have the albums playing while he worked into the early hours. His wife of seven years, Emma, who was not at the exhibition opening last Tuesday, has now separated from him.

"The Floyd was the final straw," Geary admits ruefully. "It did get fairly obsessive around the middle of last year. I was working right through the night with the music blaring. There were six weeks when I had *The Division Bell* on continuous loop. It was necessary for the work, but she couldn't sleep. You can't be a dedicated artist and run a happy marriage. Also I suppose the Floyd wasn't her

thing. But these things happen. No one is really to blame." On the contrary, that's far too magnanimous. I trust Emma will name Floyd guitarist Dave Gilmour in the divorce.

THE Arts Council has pledged to rid the arts funding system of jargon and clichés, deciding at its last meeting that communications in the arts must be more simple and effective. Well, the fight for plain English in cultural life hasn't begun very well. Immediately following that resolution by the Council it promised "the adoption of the more holistic and integrated approach to arts funding." Which we'd all support if we had a clue what it means.

WE may have scored badly at the Oscars in terms of awards, but there aren't many lessons to be learned from the Americans when it comes to acceptance speeches. Yet again they were almost without exception either cringe-making or tedious. We do things better over here.

My favourite acceptance speech of all time occurred a few years ago at The Evening Standard Drama Awards when Vanessa Redgrave broke down in tears as she thanked the stage carpenter. That takes style. Kim Basinger, eat your heart out.

THE WEEK ON RADIO

ROBERT HANKS

TRY this one for size: the only swimming-baths in your area announces that from six till nine every morning the Olympic-size pool only attracts enthusiastic, strong swimmers. In order to get in the non-swimming public, the pool will be closed down at those times and an inflatable paddling-pool provided instead. You'd think that was pretty stupid, wouldn't you?

Well, that's a pretty fair analogy for what has just happened at Radio 3 – the warm, shallow splash of water in question being Petroc Trelawny, who has this week taken over as presenter of the station's daily breakfast programme, *On Air*.

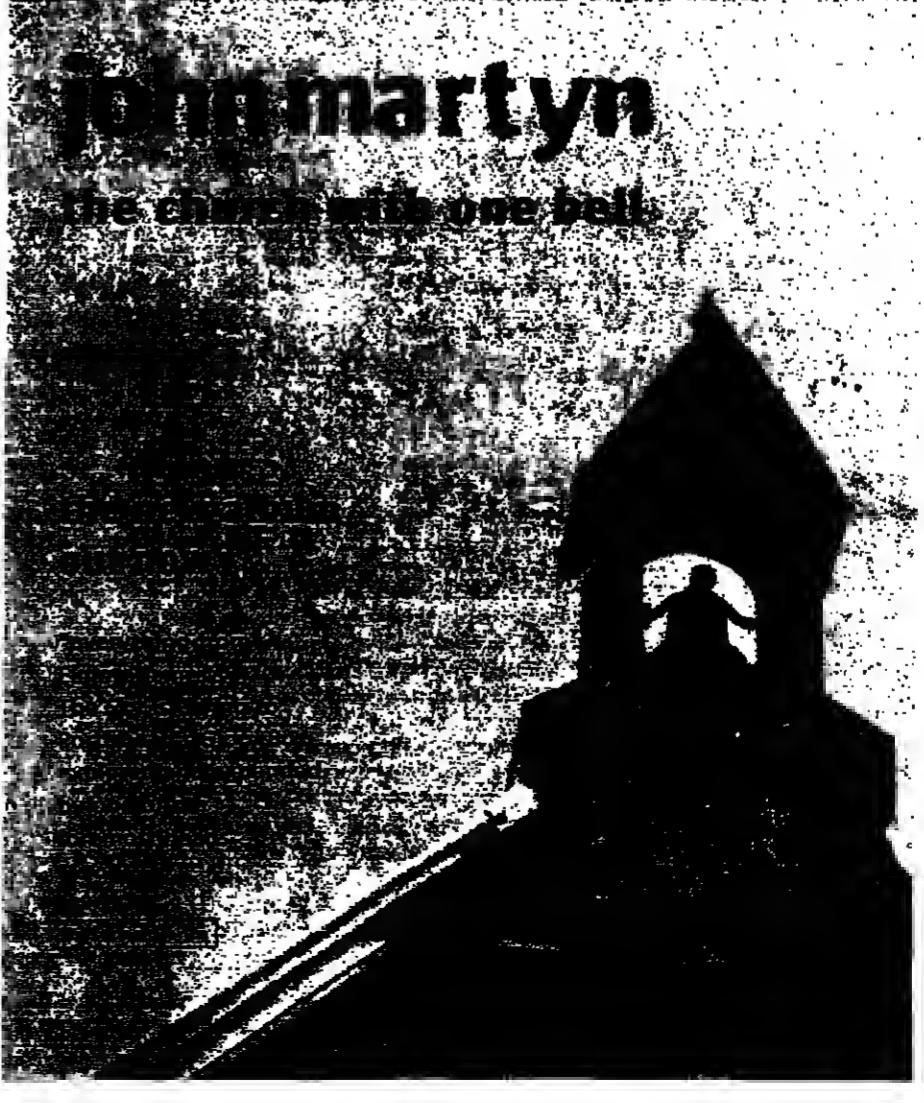
It would be nice to regale you with instances of Trelawny's idiocies but to be honest, none of them is terribly interesting or amusing: pure vacuity hardly ever is.

In any case, the issue is less how dull Trelawny is than why he takes so many opportunities to prove it. *On Air* has abandoned completely the practice of playing long spans of music in favour of snatches and fragments on movement of Brahms's German Requiem, a quick aria from The Creation, a single song from the Anvergne, nothing more than five or six minutes long, and separated by Trelawny's flow of breezy chat. At the same time, the repertoire is being nar-

rowed – Thursday was the fourth time in a fortnight I have heard one or more of the "Songs of the Auvergne" on Radio 3.

This isn't a matter of snobbery or musical elitism, it's a matter of having the pants irritated off you. That and good programming sense. Radio 3's unique selling-point was that it played pieces of classic music in their entirety; it created an opportunity for disengagement with the conversational burly-burly of the world outside. Now it is simply an annoying clone of Classic FM. Trying to justify its existence by upping its ratings, it is wrecking the only genuine justification it has: that it provides something the commercial sector can't.

What's bizarre is that this musical self-disembowelling has been perpetrated in the same week that Tuesday evening's concert interval was turned over to weirdly hallucinatory poems by the French Symbolists and the Postscript strand was devoted to the work of a single philosopher. (Though, disappointingly, David Cook's tribute to the influence of Alasdair MacIntyre's moral treatise, 'After Virtue', ended up a nostalgic commercial for a God-fearing society.) Radio 3 clearly doesn't think its listeners are stupid; it must just think they're not very interested in music.



THE INDEPENDENT

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In defence of unhappiness

BEING an MP leads to higher levels of physical and emotional stress, researchers have found. Well, knock us down with a ballot paper. It is a commonplace that you have got to be pretty strange to want to be an MP, and what are academic researchers for if not for dressing up the commonplace?

What Ashley Weinberg and his colleagues at Manchester University do not ask – and this is an indictment of modern academic research, because it is a far more interesting question – is do you have to be mad to rule the world?

Now, before mental health charities inundate our letters page, let us make a distinction. We understand that mental illness can be a serious matter, a tragedy for families and individuals. We are aware that much mental disorder is misunderstood, that schizophrenia is nothing to do with a split personality, that terms such as "nutter" and even "cure in the community" can cause terrible offence. We know that up to one-fifth of our prison population might be classified as suffering mental health problems, and that mental illness is either symptom or cause of much avoidable suffering at all levels of society.

But it is not a frivolous speculation – at least, not wholly – to wonder whether a certain amount of psychological disturbance is not necessary for the achievement of change in society. Is there not an implication in Mr Weinberg's research that MPs should be doused in tranquilliser and sent off to health farms to relax in white towelling robes? And is this implied search for mental hygiene not, actually, unhealthy?

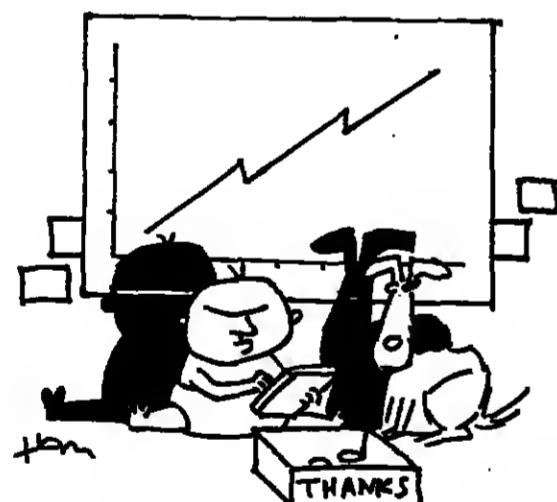
It is remarkable that, as any historian would tell you, almost all prominent figures in public life are driven characters, overcompensating for some trauma or unhappiness in their early lives. Even the Prime Minister, a balanced young man with untroubled blue eyes, was knocked sideways at the age of 11 by his father's stroke. The even more boring, but equally driven, John Major had that downward lurch to a Brixton garret at a similar age. Margaret Thatcher had that famous reticence about her mother, and became ever more markedly domineering in adulthood, eventually prompting Brian Walden's impertinent observation in an interview: "They think you're off your trolley."

Unhappiness is the grit in the oyster. This applies not just to MPs, but to business leaders and great artists. Some of them, at least. Many entrepreneurs had secure childhoods and their start in business handed to them on a plate. But Andy Grove, for example, the boss of Intel, the computer chip company, is a Holocaust survivor and self-confessed paranoid obsessive. He wrote a book which revealed that his hot tip was not to relax for a second, called *Only the Paranoid Survive*.

And it is a cliché that art madness and greatness are proximate conditions. Pluck the names at random and images from the simply eccentric to the extremes of human consciousness are conjured forth. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, Vincent van Gogh, Syd Barrett. Of course, for each name it is possible to cite a Sir Paul McCartney or a Joseph Heller. Mr Heller, whose *Catch-22* knows a thing or two about madness, complained recently that he had a happy childhood. Don't you believe it. His father died when he was five, and the books are suffused with a sense of loss, often portraying the father-son relationship as unbearably close and yet uncommunicative.

Of course, madness is not a simple formula for success. It remains true that if someone's childhood is highly dysfunctional, the chances are that they will go off the rails and require the attentions of New Labour's curfew squads and welfare-to-work gangs.

We do not suggest that David Blunkett should amend yesterday's proposals for nursery schooling to ensure that all four-year-olds are unhappy for at least some of the time, or that Jack Straw should institute bad parenting classes.



The requirements of creativity are that the tendency to eccentricity must be bridled by at least an intermittent sense of the possible. Ambition needs to be tempered by restraint. Both are needed, and the most forceful lives are born out of a tension between the two.

This imposes a dilemma on parents: most say they would prefer their children to be happy than to be high achievers. Simone Veil's mother was once asked if she was proud of her daughter, another Holocaust survivor, distinguished minister in French governments and author of the 1975 law to allow abortion. She said she would have much preferred her to be happy.

But we do not employ MPs to be normal, sated and contented. We employ them to get things done, to overcome the dead-weight of bureaucratic inertia and institutional sclerosis. Let us be grateful that at least some people are unhappy enough to improve the quality of life for the rest.

Lib Dems make the difference

NOT in Inverness they don't. The 10 representatives who managed to drag themselves into the 800-seat Eden Court Theatre yesterday morning for their Scottish conference were not enough to make the difference between empty and full. This poor turnout is a pity, not just because it affords second-rate gaggists the chance to re-run the one about holding their conference in a phone box. (Actually, they adjourned to an adjacent boardroom.)

It is also a shame because of the temptation it presents to dismiss the Scottish Liberal Democrats. Paddy's party north of the border has always been able to punch above its bantam weight. The choice of a proportional system for elections to the Scottish Parliament next year will, almost inevitably, grant the party's Scottish leader, Jim Wallace, the role of kingmaker between Labour and the Scottish National Party. The party might well be a partner in a coalition government.

Should he choose Labour, the way in which that works will be of crucial importance to the possibility of future closer co-operation between the parties at Westminster. Will the Lib Dems realise Tony Blair's fear of proportional systems and exercise "disproportionate influence"? Or will they be the test pilots for the new progressive-radical movement for the 21st century that Mr Blair promised in his conference speech last year? Those 10 activists have their work cut out.

Jonesboro shootings

RATHER than simply blaming the parents, the children involved, or the guns used, for the shooting in Jonesboro, the Governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, had the courage to point out (report, 26 March) society's responsibility for incidents like this, be they at Dunblane, Port Arthur or Jonesboro.

The value of human life has been eroded over the decades through the growth of euthanasia, abortion, and television and computer-game violence, which all promote the killing of people who happen to be an inconvenience.

Until we as a society, and politicians, sit up and take notice of this reality, the banning of guns and other lethal weapons, and the suffering of prison sentences for that kind of act, will deal with the symptoms, but continue to have no real impact on the causes of the problem.

ANDREW BOWDLER

Pokhara, Nepal

HAVING studied at the University of Arkansas for three years, I strongly agreed with Rupert Cornwell's article regarding the American relationship with the gun ("The impossible dream – America without guns", 26 March).

Arkansas is a state heavily involved with hunting and gun ownership is seen as a rite of passage for many young Arkansans. Some college friends of mine asserted that they would not consider going for a long drive without a gun in the glove box purely for self-defence, of course.

However, northern Arkansas is a friendly place where people leave their cars and homes unlocked. The shock of Tuesday's horrific shootings will have been profound, but its likely effect will be a call for changes to the Arkansas prosecution laws rather than a change in the gun laws that precipitated this tragedy.

HELEN GORMAN

Nottingham

IN the wake of the horrific events in Arkansas, it once again seems as if everyone is qualified to psychoanalyse the two adolescents and understand their every motivation. This forms a convenient channel through which they can expound their own theories about the collapse of society.

Despite the fact that dozens of studies have shown no quantifiable link between screen violence and real-life crime, David Usborne (report, 27 March) still assumes that videos have a comparable influence to that of the boys' fathers, who have spent years training them to fire semi-automatic weapons at other living creatures.

DANIEL SMITH

Aberdeen

Companies using political consultancies do not buy influence – they buy knowledge (of the arcane political processes) and skills (in manoeuvring one's way through them). Unless and until the Modernisation Select Committee makes Parliament's procedure less a series of tribal rituals and more a transparent and



The US flag flies at half-mast at Westside School, Jonesboro: four pupils and a teacher were killed in shootings earlier this week
Photograph: Reuters

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Post letters to Letters to the Editor and include a daytime telephone number
Fax 0171 293 2056; e-mail: letters@independent.co.uk E-mail correspondents are asked to give a postal address. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

Why we need lobbyists

IT IS implicitly assumed in your article "Revealed: Labour's links with lobbyists" (24 March) that political consultancies are detrimental to a well-functioning democracy.

Companies using political consultancies do not buy influence – they buy knowledge (of the arcane political processes) and skills (in manoeuvring one's way through them).

Unless and until the Modernisation Select Committee makes Parliament's procedure less a series of tribal rituals and more a transparent and

effective legislative machine, then lobbyists will always have a valid and necessary role to play in the UK. At the very least they are a necessary evil.

RICHARD MOLLET
Lodge Communications
London EC1

Modified tomatoes

ZENECA has given evidence to the Government's advisory committee on genetic modification that "the intense heat used in peeling and then sterilising GMO tomatoes kills any seeds and effectively destroys the anti-

tobacco resistance" (19 March).

Heat will certainly kill a living plant but will it really destroy the kanamycin resistance genes inserted into every cell of these fruit? DNA is tough stuff and is very resistant to heat degradation – life wouldn't have been around so long if the substance which makes it happen fell to bits so easily.

I would like to be more certain that the Government's advisory committee is requiring independent validation of the unlikely evidence submitted by Zeneeca.

JOANNA CLARKE

Glasgow

QUOTE UNQUOTE

"We want to rear a nation of taxpayers and to make tax a part of our culture. We promise sizzling storylines with murder, financial scams and, of course, sex." — Yury Medvedev, Russia's tax office spokesman discussing a new TV show designed to persuade people to pay tax.

"The New Conservative rank and file is made up in large part of hard-hearted Essex businessmen, second-rate academics and opinionated young unemployed." — Auberon Waugh, TV pundit and commentator.

"It's cool to be 40. It really is a new life. I'm happy but I am sure there's a team of psychiatrists out there somewhere who would disagree with me." — Sharon Stone, actress.

"Sometimes I get the church and the movie theatre confused. That's what I told the Dalai Lama the first time I met him." — Martin Scorsese, film director.

"Thank you my dear, but really, you know, you should have served Mrs Callaghan first." — Lord Callaghan, when prime minister, in a young waitress who tipped an entire sizzling leg of lamb into his lap.

"She should get the Oscar for best bust. Anyone with those floaters doesn't need a lifeboat." — Camille Paglia, feminist and academic, discussing actress Kate Winslet, star of "Titanic".

"It's cool to be 40. It really is a new life. I'm happy but I am sure there's a team of psychiatrists out there somewhere who would disagree with me." — Sharon Stone, actress.

"She should get the Oscar for best bust. Anyone with those floaters doesn't need a lifeboat." — Camille Paglia, feminist and academic, discussing actress Kate Winslet, star of "Titanic".

LETTER from THE EDITOR

TODAY, I shall be out on the streets of central London marching for a cause I believe in. While at the *Independent* on Sunday, I decided to launch a campaign for the decriminalisation of cannabis – not heroin, cocaine, or other hard drugs but pot, which has very few harmful side effects and even better, can alleviate the suffering of multiple sclerosis sufferers. At noon today, MS groups will join me, MPs, MEPs and supporters of our campaign as we wend our way from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square. It will be an intensely exciting occasion, one that marks a high-point in our six-month effort. But there is still much work to be done – while studies released by the World Health Organisation and British Medical Association point to the relatively benign affects of cannabis versus other drugs, most notably alcohol, and many public figures from the media, medicine, science, the arts, even the police have voiced their support, the Government refuses to budge.

That is why we are marching today, and hopefully, at last, Tony Blair and Jack Straw will listen and understand this is one campaign that is not going to go away.

THIS week, *The Independent* invited the main party leaders to sign up to the Prime Minister's powerful statement attacking racism which he delivered in Southwark 10 days ago. Here at

The Independent we applauded his sentiments. So too did William Hague and Paddy Ashdown, who echoed his views. As our political editor, Anthony Bevins, wrote in the paper on Wednesday, racism is endemic in our society. Barely had Tony written this than the Director-General of the Prison Service, Richard Tilt, said that Afro-Caribbean people were more prone to suffer "postural asphyxia" than white people. There were "physiological differences as well," he added. Mr Tilt did at least admit that there was racism in the Prison Service, but attitudes like his – which reminded me of the Bell Curve controversy in America – show how urgent the party leaders' commitment truly is. As a newspaper, *The Independent* has always stood firmly behind its belief in racial, cultural and sexual freedom for all. But we can never be complacent. As Mr Hague said, "more needs to be done to bring down the barriers of ignorance and mistrust which still exist in parts of our society."

SO, Canadian teenagers have gone wild for Prince William. Ten thousand hysterical girls turned out to see him as "Willis Mania" swept through Vancouver. In my teenage daughter's view, William's reign as the king of pin-ups lasted for only a part of the autumn term following Diana's death. It ended abruptly with the arrival of Leonardo DiCaprio, star of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Titanic* and now *The Man in the Iron Mask*. William,

as far as my daughter is concerned, is history. She is, however, disgusted by her mother's poor judgement: three years ago, while I was editing *Esquire*, I went to a party at Giorgio Armani's. As I sat down to eat, a young man flopped into the seat beside me. His name was Leonardo DiCaprio. His blond hair was hanging over his eyebrows, his jeans and trainers decidedly scruffy. "Put me on the cover of your magazine, I'm years old." At that point his fame was limited to his (totally brilliant) performance in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. I didn't put him on the cover. My daughter cannot believe it.

LAST Monday, the *Independent* reporter Steve Goodwin set off to climb Everest. The office clapped as he departed for his flight from London to Kathmandu. As someone who read Jon Krakauer's extraordinary account of climbing Everest, *Into Thin Air*, when it first appeared as an extract in America's *Outside* magazine, I am moved and impressed by Steve's guts. Tech-permitting, you'll be able to follow the ascent day by day in the pages of *The Independent* over the next 10 weeks. He has our very best wishes.

RODRIKE BOYCOTT

Marketing Diana

THE Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund may be in danger of squandering its greatest asset through the lack of an intelligent marketing strategy (report, 25 March). Brand marketing, of "names", is highly sophisticated and sound precedents exist which it would be perilous to ignore.

Consumer decisions are based on perceptions of status, style, performance and price, any one of which will dominate in any one spending decision. It is impossible to be all things to all men and women and broad-spectrum marketing is rarely viable beyond domestic consumables.

The retained images of Diana: of an elegant beauty, of a deeply caring human being who overcame huge personal problems to bring hope to others, are the vital asset in the trust of the Memorial Fund. It must understand its real potential and act accordingly. The price of failure will be a nine-day wonder which will do no-one, particularly the fund beneficiaries, any good.

JOHN A DINNING
Camberley, Surrey

One's better than ever

AS A commercial driver I, like Pierre Perrone ("One FM: singularly unsensational", 25 March), hear radio all over the UK, and my view is that Radio One is one of the very best reasons to pay a licence fee. Without their freedom to play just about anything they want, that frequency too would sound like the unchallenging blandness which is 97 per cent of commercial radio.

Without Radio One's commitment to break new music (that doesn't mean they can never play anything familiar, Pierre) there would be no Cornershop, Space, Verve, Run DMC, Nevins, All Seeing 1 etc for unadventurous commercial stations to plagiarise and play to death. To me, Radio One sounds better than it ever has. Would any commercial station in the UK allow the experimentation of Chris Morris or the cheeky Chris Moyles or the "northernness" of Mark and Lard? Not unless it was made safer by Radio One doing it first.

STEPHANIE WILKINSON
Manchester

FORTUNATELY, your claim (in the News, 27 March) that Chris Morris's rude subliminal message to Michael Grade could only have been seen by someone with industry-standard editing equipment is wrong. A video of the programme and a little patience are all you need to enjoy this very satisfying media moment.

JOE FATTORINI

Glasgow

Motor neurone disease

REGARDING the report by Sally Staples ("The woman who fought a hidden killer", 20 March), we are concerned to correct the impression that people with MND will die from choking or through suffocation. In our experience, death is usually as a result of respiratory failure and with the right palliative care, is pain-free and peaceful. Annie Lindsell, the woman featured in the article, who died last December, did in fact die peacefully.

LAURA SIMONS

Head of Communications
Motor Neurone Disease Association
Northampton

'Racist' prison chief

THE assertion by Richard Tilt, head of the Prison Service, that, for genetic reasons, black people are more liable than whites to die when in a neck lock (report, 27 March), is to be welcomed. This must mean that instructions have already gone out to everyone in the Prison Service that anyone putting a black person in a neck lock may face charges of attempted murder.

I hope that, when the matter is put to a scientific test, the excellent Mr Tilt will not be one of the strong-necked whites used as controls.

Professor C R LEEDHAM-GREEN

Woodford Green, Essex

to SUCCE

Secrets the ancient Egyptians had hoped to keep to themselves



DAVID AARONOVITCH
UNEXPECTED USES FOR
MUMMIFIED DNA

Old Seti II is not much to look at (though his admirers are keen to point out that he's borne up better than Senwosret IV). His skin is black and desiccated, his teeth are cracked, his genitalia are more than a shrivelled flap between his sick-like thighs, and his hand has an unpleasant habit of working itself loose, and sliding over his shrunken chest, to the bottom of his box. So, despite the fact that he's remarkably well-preserved for a 3,000-year-old, you wouldn't expect him to be of use to anyone now. No point in asking him the way to the feluccas.

Actually, that's not true. Perhaps ten years ago we might not have counted on getting very much out of an Egyptian mummy (unless we were superstitious), but now we are a nation of cadaverophiles. Poking dead bodies and interrogating their mute remains, has become something of an obsession. We're all at it. That artist bloke (the one with the posh name accused of purloining body parts, casting them in metal and then hiding the originals inside upturned boxes in the flats of unsuspecting girl-friends) was just the tip of the iceberg.

TV factual shows, such as *Time Team*, *Shadows of Our Ancestors* and *Ice Mummies*, and fictional pathologists-as-superheroes (you know, "Let's take a look at the brain," "Grrrghhh!" "It's his first time, Dr Skinner"), such as *Silent Witness* and *McCallum*, testify to our fascination with the dead. Like those weird Madagascan "relative retrieval" rituals, you hardly have time to bury your relatives these days, before some academic or arty type wants to dig them up again, and reconstruct them.

Because, of course, there is so much to find out! A recent edition of the "Journal of the Autonomic Nervous System" (*de rigueur* in our household since the Murdoch and China business disillusioned us with the *Times*) - vol 67, p 105, to be exact - reported on the findings of a team looking at the neurotransmitters of the long embalmed. They took nerves from the ankles

of number of Egyptian mummies who kicked the earthenware sometime between 500 and 2000 BC, and a teasing little sample from just one Peruvian mummy of slightly more recent origin.

These enterprising palaeo-neurobiologists sliced up the nerves, embedded them in wax, and then (but, of course, you know all this) incubated them with antibodies. Their findings were both dramatic and incomprehensible. Suffice it to say that Professor Otto Appenzeller concluded that, in the near future, we would be able to discover all kinds of things about the people of the past that we do not now know.

Then, just this week, came the story of how the custodians of Manchester University's Egyptian Mummy Tissue Bank have written to thousands of institutions worldwide asking for a lend of their corpses. Dr Rosalind David told the BBC *Today* programme that the technique was to "go in with industrial endoscopes through existing bodily holes". There's a charming creation here, as though Dr David wished to reassure us that she for one, would never be party to making new holes in old bodies.

Anyway, she was hoping, she continued, to be able to tell what diseases the mummies had suffered from, what they looked like (eye colour, etc.) and - with the help of DNA - which other mummies they were related to.

At the moment, of course, all we have to go on is all those heroic murals and stelae, depicting vigorous Pharaohs smiting their enemies or communing with a series of improbable gods. There is a timeless tendency for important figures to present themselves in an impossibly good light in public. When was the last time, for instance, that a party leader, mid-Dimbleby, let loose a loud fart? And yet we presume that pockets of wind travel the intestines of the famous, as they do ours.

This is intriguing. Was Nefertiti a natural blonde? Or perhaps Tutankhamun was a drying-out alcoholic. Imagine our pleasure when it is proved that Amenhotep III (the model, you will remember, for the Colossi of Memnon at Thebes), was three-foot tall, syphilitic, suffered from chronic haemorrhoids and had feet covered in veruccas.

And - if sex addiction could be traced - all those bad-tempered attacks on various Libyans, Nubians, Sea-Peoples, Hittites, Philistines and Hebrews by Ramesses the Great might be explained by a need to divert attention away from various palace entanglements with the Iron Age precursors of Monica Lewinsky and Paula Jones. The principle "he that has been smitten must himself smile" may be older than we thought.

My own favourite conjecture is that, in Shelley's vast and trackless desert, an Egyptian king with a slight speech impediment had caused to be carved in stone the legend: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings, gathe on my worketh ye mortal and dethipair."

There is, in all this, a wonderful irony. Thousands of years ago, a static and superstitious ruling class had the bodies of their kings and priests eviscerated, their skins elaborately prepared by the application of unspeakable unguents, wrapped in bandages, shoved inside a wooden box, then a stone sarcophagus, and finally placed in a hidden tomb - all in the absurd belief that, somehow, the mummified individual would one day live again. And the bugger of it is, of course, that it worked.

For more than two decades Michael Jackson has been changing from black to white, and whether the reason is a nat-

Everyone may think it's cool to be black, but it's really hard work



TREVOR PHILLIPS

WANTING TO BE DIFFERENT

So you wannabeblack? Since this is one of the few areas in which I can claim to be an expert let me give you a few tips before you finally make up your mind.

Quentin Tarantino says that he feels black inside, and wishes that the colour of his skin matched that of his soul. I heard that Steven Spielberg, who has adopted black children, feels a kinship with the brethren that is closer than friendship. And, I saw the Prince William and Charles putting their caps on backwards and giving the "Yo, dude" sign. I know that William Hague has been virtually one of us since Carnival last year, and in this week's party political broadcast there was a suspiciously high melanin count. This is very serious people; the fact that it is Hollywood leading the charge means that even now there is at least one clinic working on the melanin-reinforcement treatment that will give the stars what they want.

I would be the last to argue against people knowing about and trying out elements of each others' cultures. That's healthy. It is also the way of the world today; we can all travel wherever we want, and we can, happily, discover new ways of living. In particular, the growth of cities means that most of humanity can find somewhere away from their ancestral village, where no-one knows them, and where they can, in part, reinvent their lives. This is why cities like New York and London are an earthly approximation of Heaven; if we make it there we can be forgiven all our past sins. But I draw the line at physically wanting to turn into something else.

For goodness' sakes, what if you get it wrong? There may be no going back. It may be fine to be a Tory one year and a New Labourite the next, but who can tell the difference anyway? Changing your race is something else altogether. Take the sad case of the self-styled King of Pop. For more than two decades Michael Jackson has been changing from black to white, and whether the reason is a nat-



Yo dude: wear that cap backwards and join the brothers

ability of being funky all the time. Europeans, being totally dysfunctional cannot grasp just how much effort goes into being hip. You have to learn a language that is constantly being refreshed so that nobody else understands it; every time "they" learn the meaning of words like "wicked" and "24/7" we have to stop using them and invent something new. Otherwise no-one believes that you're black, and people say cruel things like "You're just like us, really".

Another variety of this - moles only - is the desirability of being edgy and dangerous. Most of my black contemporaries have spent years perfecting that mean, moody look that says "Don't mess with me"; it's an art form, but like all art, it takes its toll. You cannot watch *Blind Date* or *Friends* and look mean and moody at the same time. It is an impossibility; so you end up missing the fun, or else being thought "not very black" (a curious expression, but one that people use all the time about someone who doesn't quite fit their idea of what a black person should be like).

And finally there is the biggest problem about being black: *once you've started, you can't stop*. This is a one-way ticket. And on this journey, if you want to join the club, you carry *all* the baggage, you may be a chic black woman, but with the image comes an age-old suggestion of availability. The more accomplished you may be in athletics the more the picture posters paint you as a bear of little brain. The more you seem streetwise, the stronger the odour of criminality. And of course it is precisely the whisper of danger that attracts people who otherwise would live nice safe *non-black* lives. The wannabeblax are playing with fire. That's their business, but they do need to look deep into the flames and work out what it is they are getting themselves into. Be careful, boys and girls; you never know what you might turn into.

Then there is the responsibil-

culture and become alcoholic jazz musicians; in more recent times, Bob Marley's glamour brought a posse of doped-up white rastafarians into being, christened affectionately "wiggas". These were people who wanted to escape from dull, predictable lives, and they would have been the same were they black, white or anything else.

The sons and daughters of Africa are emerging as the most desirable role models in the world, whether mixed with other genes or not. Who would not want to possess the unmodified beauty of Halle Berry or Naomi Campbell; to carry the gravitas of General Colin Powell or the saintliness of Nelson Mandela; to enjoy the athletic success of Magic Johnson or Tiger Woods; to feel the prestige of a Mike Tyson or the sheer mischief of Ian Wright? These are the heroes of our time. And this influence is not just limited to performers: the black pre-eminence is stretching into the arena of basic moral values. For two decades, the most significant poet-philosopher in the world was called Muhammad Ali; and today the queen of western mores, able to call kings and presidents to account is Miss Oprah Winfrey.

It used to be the case that it was just a few beatniks who wanted to shed their colour and culture and become alcoholic jazz musicians; in more recent times, Bob Marley's glamour brought a posse of doped-up white rastafarians into being, christened affectionately "wiggas". These were people who wanted to escape from dull, predictable lives, and they would have been the same were they black, white or anything else.

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It used to be the case that it was just a few beatniks who wanted to shed their colour and

into sex - just think how much passion will have been built up by the time you actually say yes. But then we would rather hear that from the authors of *The Rules* who, after all, inform us they both have found the perfect man.

Still I wish I thought of Dory Hollander PhD's idea which is a book called *101 Lies Men Tell Women and Why Women Believe Them*, with ex-

amples such as Lie 3: "You're the only one", and Lie 38: "I'm going to leave my wife." The reason why women believe such things (and why men would too in the same situation) is our own desire to be wanted and our fear of failure and rejection. Your mother would tell you that for nothing, but because she's not a published author or a PhD, you're inclined to ask Dory instead.

In the same way the Church of England, with its disapproval of sex before marriage, would be happy to tell us: "Don't rush

skills to you and me) and TQM (total quality management, or changing things gradually). So someone has made a lot of money telling people that keeping up to date with what's going on and not going for radical changes overnight could be good for you.

Still that is nothing compared to the vast array of self-help books that assault the eye in every bookshop. I have to declare an interest here. I used to buy self-help books by the shelf until a ex-boyfriend brought a Dale Carnegie book home

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How to succeed by stating the obvious



GLENDA COOPER
PACKAGING COMMON SENSE

DID you know that anorexics feel that eating is the one part of their life that they can control? Or that new MPs thrust into the spotlight feel more stressed? Or that vitamin supplements don't increase intelligence?

Yes, so did I.

This weekend the British Psychological Society holds its annual conference in Brighton, and among the genuine insights it throws up there are always a large amount of studies (of which the three listed above are examples) which contain the blindingly obvious. In the past we have been told that women still go for handsome rich men; that men like young babes; and that teenage girls on diets get more miserable as time goes on, particularly if they don't seem to be achieving their goal weight.

I always come away from such conferences with a strong desire to throw in journalism and get a fat psychological grant for a study to see if north London twenty-something women experienced more positive feelings and less neuroses in the Caribbean than in Kilburn, a study I am of course willing to participate in myself. You note that I say positive feelings. If I submitted a proposal saying that I wanted to see if women have a laugh in Barbados I wouldn't be playing the game. For a big part of stating

the obvious is wrapping it up in jargon.

Shelley once said that poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of mankind". Nowadays he should look at the spread of experts advising on management, whose words are now treated as holy writ. Business theory has spawned a whole host of annoying TLAs (three letter acronyms) such as CPD (continuous professional development), or updating your

Everyone is happy. We get our prejudices confirmed, and the learned societies, theorists and authors make some money

skills to you and me) and TQM (total quality management, or changing things gradually). So someone has made a lot of money telling people that keeping up to date with what's going on and not going for radical changes overnight could be good for you.

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JULIA KSD

Broker provides a welcome boost for Reuters

MARKET REPORT



PETER THAL LARSEN

REUTERS has not had a good time so far in 1998. Just three months into the year, the financial information giant's shares have taken a pummelling. While the market has soared to new highs, Reuters' shares have gone in the opposite direction.

First came the Asian crisis. Although Reuters maintains that financial newsroom boos demand for timely and accurate information, the thought of collapsing Japanese banks handing back all their Reuters terminals was enough to give most investors the jitters.

Then Reuters was hit by allegations that it had stolen information from arch-rival Bloomberg and incorporated it in software used for analysing bonds. A Federal Grand Jury in New York is currently investigating the charges. While the company maintained a stoic silence, investors ran for the hills, and the shares briefly touched a two-year low of 520p.

In recent weeks, however, the stock market has been taking a more considered view of Reuters. And the company was given a welcome boost yesterday when stockbroker Dresdner Kleinwort Benson stepped up a buy recommendation on the shares with a target price of 750p. The shares promptly jumped 85p to 644.5p.

DKB argues that fears of slowing growth rates are overstated. It expects Reuters to expand at the market for financial information consultates, while new products will boost sales. The broker forecasts that profit growth over the next five years will average about 11 per cent. While the US investigation remains a worry, the broker expects Reuters "to continue creating significant shareholder value".

The market staged a half-hearted recovery yesterday after a week of drift. But while Foothsie was briefly showing a 71-point gain, it was dragged back by a fall on Wall Street and ended the day up a modest 33.7 points at 5939.3. The midcap and smallcap indices also posted slight gains.

Best performer in the Foothsie was Billiton, the metals group which has had a torrid time since joining the stock market at 220p last summer. News that Venezuela is reviving plans to sell its state-run aluminium smelter, in which Billiton has shown an interest, helped revive investors' interest. The shares closed up 9.5p to 165.5p.

Advertising outfit More Group, which agreed to a £100m-a-share bid from US giant Clear Channel Communications last month, soared 93.5p to 1222.5p as French rival IC Decaux announced that it was considering a counter-bid at a "meaningful premium" to Clear Channel's offer. More Group advised shareholders to take no action. Billboard group Maiden, which reports results on Monday, added 22.5p to 406p in sympathy.

Sports retailer JJB Sports ended its recent slide, bouncing 35p to 670p. The shares were 822.5p a few weeks ago.

Mobile phone operator Orange continued to slide amid suggestions that SBC Warburg had been unable fully to place the 16 per cent stake it bought from British Aerospace yesterday. Now that the sale has taken place several

brokers have turned negative on the stock. The shares, bought by Warburg for 35p, closed down 8p at 309p.

Next also continued to suffer from yesterday's profit warning, giving up another 9p to settle at 535p.

Racial firmed 1p to a 12-month high of 330p on a buy recommendation from Henderson Crosthwaite. The stockbroker calculates that, on current valuations, Racial's telecoms arm is worth £600m - valuing the rest of Racial at just £340m. That value should be crystallised when the telecoms business is floated in the next 18 months. Sir Ernest Harrison, Racial's chairman, has already twice pulled off the trick of releasing value from the company by demerging mobile operator Vodafone and security group Chubb.

Persistent bid chatter and expectations of good first-quarter figures, due out next week, pushed Vodafone 9p higher to 602p.

General Cable firmed 6p to 155.5p on suggestions that local cable operator Telwest, 2p better at 94.5p, was about to table a £600m bid for the company. The group has already been holding discussions with NTL, the UK-based cable firm which is quoted on Nasdaq.

Aspen, providing specialist printing and marketing services, leapt 35p to 122.5p as Photobooth, the photographic and printing services group, announced that it had bought a 2.9 per cent stake and might make a bid.

Printed circuit board maker Prestwick was dumped 17p to 35p as it announced that bid talks had been terminated and that, due to delayed call off of contracts from major customers, it was trading "below market expectations".

Lady in Leisure, operating women-only health clubs, jumped 20p to 217.5p. The shares have soared from below 130p since the beginning of the year.

TAKING STOCK

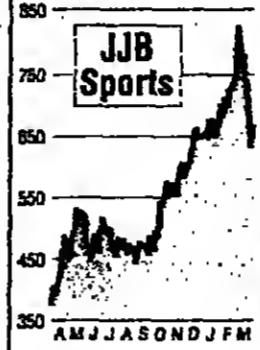
ROYAL JELLY group Regis jumped 3.25p to 10p. US marketing group Tru-Vantage International, which specialises in direct response, electronic and network marketing, will take over the marketing and distribution of Regis products in the US. To pay for the deal, it has agreed to subscribe to 1,126,200 new shares in Regis at 15p each.

DIAMOND explorer Petra Diamonds jumped 6p to 123.5p on AIM. It has signed a joint venture with Canadian exploration company AC Energy to explore and develop three diamond concessions in Angola. ACE is putting up \$2m, freeing Petra to spend more on its remaining concessions.

RANGERS, the Scottish football club, held at 380p on OTC. In a series of transactions chairman David Murray has bought 29,300 shares, at prices between 350p and 380p, taking his stake to 60.88 per cent.

Share Spotlight

Share price, pence



Source: Bloomberg

Share Price Data

Prices are in sterling except where stated. The yield is the latest twelve months' declared gross dividend as a percentage of the share price. The price/earnings (PE) ratio is the share price divided by last year's earnings per share, netting extraordinary items. Dividends are per share. Cash dividends: Ex rights, ex; Ex dividend, a cash; v suspended; p partly paid; np not paid; ADR, American Depository Receipt; GDR, Global Depository Receipt.

Source: Bloomberg

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Share volume: 878.5m trades 77,546

Gilt Index n.a.

Market Leaders: Top 20 volumes

at 32 weeks

Stock	Stock	Val	Stock	Val
Shell Tramp	Astra Group	9.3m	Qinetiq Meat	9.3m
BPTR	Loher	8.8m	DBA Petroleum	7.8m
HSC Ridge	Cetica	8.2m	Smashdown Beach	8.1m
BT Group	Vodafone	8.1m	Unilever	7.6m
Vodafone	Bta Telecom	8.0m	Enron	7.6m
BT Group	Global Webwise	7.8m	BTi Petrol	7.6m
BT Group	BTi Petrol	7.6m	Diageo Group	8.8m

FTSE 100 Index: hour by hour

Open 5075.5 Down 7.00 Up 204.00 Up 50.40 Up 294.4 Up 58.80 Up 0.5

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24/BUSINESS

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NEWS DESK: 0171-293 2636 FAX: 0171-293 2098 E-MAIL: INDYBUSINESS@INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
FINANCIAL JOURNAL OF THE YEAR

Founders of Computacenter could be worth £250m each as company prepares to cash in on soaring demand for UK information technology shares

Computer giant lines up £1 bn float

By Peter Thal Larsen

COPUTACENTER one of Britain's largest information technology companies, is preparing to join the Stock Exchange's booming IT index in a flotation which would value the group at around £1bn.

The company has appointed Goldman Sachs, the US investment bank, to handle the flotation. It is expected to confirm the move within the next few weeks.

A flotation would make Computacenter's two founders among the richest men in the country. Philip Hulme, the chairman, and Peter Ogden, a director, each have a 27 per cent stake in the company which would be worth at least £250m.

Computacenter, which distributes and installs computer systems for large corporate clients, has no need to raise any new money. The company has been consistently profitable and has funded most of its growth internally.

However, it is keen to provide a profit for the shareholders by its employees. About 700 of the group's 3,000 employees own 17 per cent of the company between them. A stock market listing would also allow the group to provide the rest of its workforce, which has expanded rapidly in recent years, with share options.

Moreover, it would give an

opportunity for Computacenter's financial backers to exit.

Apax and Foreign & Colonial, the venture capital firms, have long-standing shareholdings of 22 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively.

With a valuation of £1bn, Computacenter would be the largest flotation of a UK information technology company to date. ICL, the Japanese-owned group which will be valued at £1.5bn-£2bn when it comes to the market, is not planning to float until the year 2000.

Computacenter would also become one of the largest companies in the Stock Exchange's fledgling IT sector. The largest company in the sector is Misys. The software group, which narrowly missed out on joining the FTSE 100 index earlier this month, is worth £3.4bn. The index includes four other companies which are currently worth more than £1bn - Sema, CMG and Sage.

The introduction of the sector has generated a huge amount of interest in IT stocks from fund managers, who have driven up share prices to record levels. Since the Stock Exchange announced at the beginning of December that it planned to launch the sector, shares in the index's five largest constituents have risen by an average of almost 80 per cent.

Margins have also risen rapidly. Software and services companies now regularly trade

on price-earnings ratios of between 30 and 40. This is partly the erosion of the discount that UK-based IT companies have traditionally suffered compared to their US counterparts. However, valuations of IT services companies such as CMG and Sema are now higher than similar firms in the US, prompting fears among some investors that any small setback would send share prices tumbling.

Computacenter has grown rapidly by setting itself up as "one-stop-shop" to supply companies with all their computer needs. It counts third of the countries' 1,500 largest companies as its customers.

The last reported figures, for the year to December 1996, show that Computacenter made a pre-tax profit of £34m on sales of £880m.

Although 1997 results have yet to be published, they are expected to show that profits grew to £45m on turnover of about £1bn.

Computacenter is benefiting from the growing complexity of computer systems and increased demand for suppliers to build install products.

Rather than simply supply boxes, the company now also offers value-added service and training which allow it to compete on factors other than price.

Margins have risen sharply in recent years and, at 5 per cent, are well above the industry average.



Clean sweep: The finals of the Exco/Dow Jones Broomball contest at Broadgate ice rink in the City yesterday

Photograph: Emma Boam

Mahon bank to be sold

By Lea Paterson

GUINNESS MAHON - one of the oldest names in British banking - is set to be sold to Investec, the South African bank, for around £100m.

The deal raises the spectre of job cuts at the two organisations, particularly at Henderson Crosthwaite, Guinness Mahon's stockbroker, and Carr Sheppards, Investec's stockbroking arm.

The Bank of Yokohama (BoY), Guinness Mahon's Japanese parent, announced yesterday it was in "exclusive negotiations" with Investec over the sale. David Potter, Guinness Mahon's chief executive, said he expected the two parties to sign an agreement "imminently, probably some time next week". Mr Potter and his opposite number at Investec celebrated last night at a champagne reception at Guinness Mahon's offices.

Bernard Kantor, group managing director at Investec, said the acquisition of Guinness Mahon would allow his company to achieve "a critical mass" in key banking and broking markets. He added the purchase would add both an institutional broking and a corporate finance business to his bank.

One of the main areas of overlap between the two groups is in stockbroking, and neither Mr Potter nor Mr Kantor ruled out the possibility of job losses. Mr Potter said some areas of the two groups needed to be integrated, and that any process of rationalisation would be done "quietly, gently and in a professional way".

The banks did not disclose Guinness Mahon's price tag, although sources close to the deal said the price was likely to be around £100m.

Mr Potter declined to discuss his likely role within the new organisation. "We have a lot of work to do... there will be more announcements in the coming weeks," he said.

Investec is to buy the entire Guinness Mahon group, including its stake in Guinness Flight Hambrus Asset Management, a joint venture with Hambrus. It is not yet known whether Investec will also seek to buy Hambrus' stake.

Success or not, for some industry leaders the rewards just keep pouring in

BAe chief nets £3.5m, with a bonus to come

By Michael Harrison



Sir Dick Evans:
pay package
lives off

SIR Dick Evans, the chief executive of British Aerospace, received a pay package worth £3.5m last year and is in line for a 75 per cent increase in bonus entitlements in the current year.

BAE's annual report and accounts shows Sir Dick's total pay, including pension contributions, rose from £568,456 in 1996 to £727,879 - an increase of 28 per cent. In addition, he made a gain of £2.25m by cashing in share options and received shares under BAE's long term performance plan worth a further £450,000. These shares cannot be released until next year.

The accounts also show Robert Kirk, head of BAE's North American operations, retired with a package worth £4.5m after cashing in options in BAE and a subsidiary.

The bonus schemes, under

which executive directors can earn 100 per cent of their base salaries, are being amended so that the maximum entitlement will be 75 per cent.

Under the old scheme the maximum annual bonus payable is being raised from 40 per cent to 75 per cent while the awards available in the performance share plan are increasing from 60 per cent to 100 per cent of base salary.

The number of matching shares available when the annual bonus is taken in the form

of shares is also being increased, from 20 per cent to 50 per cent.

Sir Robin Biggam, BAE's remuneration committee chairman, said performance targets that triggered the increased awards were also being made tougher. BAE will seek shareholder approval for the changes at the annual meeting on 29 April.

So far a total of 150,000 shares with a market value of £3m have been granted under the performance share plan.

■ Roy Gardner, chief executive of Centrica, the trading arm of British Gas, was paid £493,000 last year. This compares with £399,000 in 1996, before the merger of British Gas, when he was finance director and then chief executive designate of Centrica. He is also sitting on 1.3m share options showing a £428,000 profit and has a notional allocation of 1.23m shares under Centrica's long term incentive scheme.

The report reveals that Sean Lance, the executive groomed to become chief operating officer at Glaxo before his shock resignation last October, received a pay off of £900,000, bringing his total remuneration to more than £1.7m in 1997.

He is also sitting on Glaxo

shares worth more than £1.3m which were awarded as part of an incentive scheme. Mr Lance was due to take up his new role this year but left the group when it was felt he was not up to the job.

Following his departure, Bob Ingram, head of Glaxo's US operation, was appointed chief executive. He saw his total pay package rise 64 per cent to almost £1.2m, including a bonus of £595,000. His basic pay is likely to rise sharply this year from £485,000 in his new role. Mr Ingram will also receive a one-off cash payment of £90,000 to reflect his move from the group's US long term incentive scheme to the UK.

Glaxo's total boardroom pay rose more than £2.5m to £7.8m in a year that the group's profits fell 9 per cent to £2.7bn due to the expiry of the patent on Zantac, the leading ulcer drug.

Glaxo and SmithKline invested in a merger which would have the biggest corporate deal ever seen.

with its increased offer which has the backing of the directors and RR Donnelly, the printing group which owns a 38 per cent stake.

The bid has degenerated into a welter of legal wrangling. ABI has sued GUS, claiming it attempted to prevent a fair auction for the business from taking place. GUS has responded with its own writ claiming ABI had no right to interfere.

Analysts said the complications were not ideal for GUS as the company is also embroiled in a £1.6bn hostile bid for Argos.

Ashley Thomas at SG Securities said: "GUS won't want to look like it is getting into a bidding war. But at these levels the difference is not significant in terms of the size of GUS. People might be concerned if they paid more than \$37."

Mr Thomas said the implications for the Argos deal were unclear. "At 570p (the price of the GUS bid) Argos is more

attractive because it is not the kind of opportunity that is going to come along very often. Whereas there are a variety of information services companies in the US."

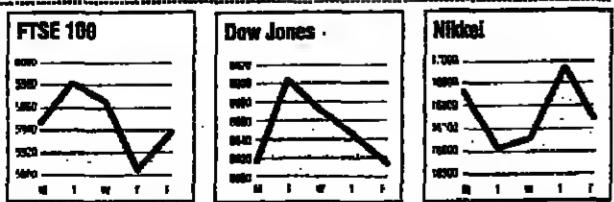
Other analysts said it was more important for GUS to build its information services business and that Argos was not a "must have" deal. GUS is keen to complete the Metromail deal as the business would be a neat fit with its Direct Technology Group in Illinois which it acquired last year.

Metromail is based just 10 miles from D-Tech and the two companies had already considered a merger before GUS acquired D-Tech.

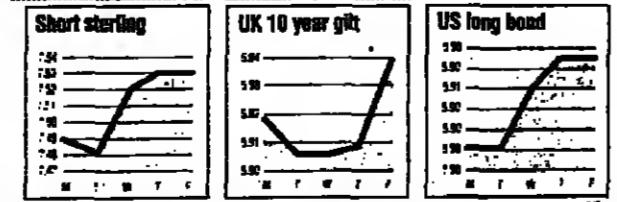
GUS shares fell 9p to 772p on the news. Argos shares rose 2p to 622p. Argos is expected to publish its final defence document next week, provided the Office of Fair Trading makes its decision on whether or not to clear the bid. The City is expecting a return of cash to shareholders.

The week in the markets

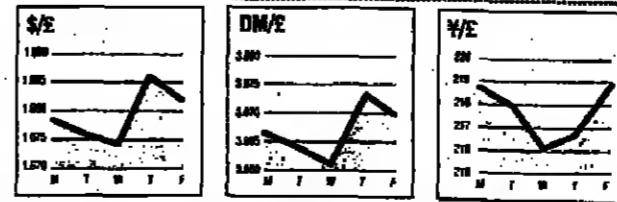
STOCK MARKETS



INTEREST RATES



CURRENCIES



MAIN PRICE CHANGES

Firms	Price	Up	Down	% Change
FTSE 100	5939.30	33.70	0.57	0.57%
Dow Jones	1061.30	2.90	0.27	0.27%
Nikkei	8812.52	-35.37	-0.40	-0.40%
FTSE 250	5533.20	17.80	0.32	0.32%
FTSE 350	2655.80	14.80	0.52	0.52%
FTSE All Share	2785.44	14.11	0.51	0.51%
FTSE SmallCap	2627.90	7.20	0.27	0.27%
FTSE Pensions	1415.30	3.20	0.23	0.23%
Dow Jones	1061.30	2.90	0.27	0.27%
Nikkei	8812.52	-35.37	-0.40	-0.40%
Hang Seng	16739.26	-241.36	-1.42	-1.42%
Dax	11735.50	-22.38	-0.19	-0.19%
FTSE	5083.16	43.48	0.86	0.86%
Dow Jones	1061.30	2.90	0.27	0.27%
Nikkei	8812.52	-35.37	-0.40	-0.40%
Hang Seng	16739.26	-241.36	-1.42	-1.42%
Dax	11735.50	-22.38	-0.19	-0.19%
FTSE	5083.16	43.48	0.86	0.86%

OTHER INDICATORS

Firms	Price	Up	Down	% Change
St James Place	265.00	-13.50	-4.05	-4.05%
David Sims Group	400.50	-18.00	-4.50	-4.50%
Debtors	364.50	-15.50	-4.00	-4.00%
JJB Sports	670.00	35.00	5.51	5.51%
BT Sky Broadband	497.00	-15.00	-3.76	-3.76%

www.bloomberg.com/uk

source: Bloomberg

TOURIST RATES

Australia (dollars)	2.4158
Austria (schillings)	20.36
Belgium (francs)	61.63
Canada (\$)	2.3223
Cyprus (pounds)	0.8667
Denmark (kroner)	11.44
Finland (markka)	9.1889
France (francs)	9.9997
Germany (marks)	2.9997



JEREMY WARNER
ON WHY THE GOVERNMENT SHOULDN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT THE POUND EVEN IF IT COULD, AND THE TROUBLE WITH HANSON'S ACCOUNTS

Why we should be celebrating the strong pound

SHOULD or could the Government do anything about the strong pound? The first myth is that it needs to be exploded is that the pound is strong at all. Actually, it's not; by historic standards, it is weak. Only since Britain's ignominious exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in September 1992 has it been consistently weaker. For much of the 1980s, it was stronger than it is now against the German mark. Go back as far as 1970, when each pound bought nine D-marks, and you would have been thought mad to suggest that by 1998 it could be as low as three.

Still, by recent standards, the pound is undoubtedly high, almost 50 per cent stronger against the mark than its low point back in 1995. And given how much of Britain's economic revival post our exit from the ERM has been attributed to the pound's subsequent devaluation, that's plainly cause for concern of some sort.

All this week, the Commons' Treasury Select Committee has been grilling economists and Treasury officials over the strong pound. MPs, Tory and Labour alike, are becoming increasingly fretful. It's destroying our manufacturing industry, it's undermining our exports, something must be done, is the general refrain.

Even if these things were true, which is not in the least bit certain, it is not clear the Government could do anything. Control of

monetary policy has been placed with the newly independent Bank of England. The only way Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, could directly persuade the Bank to reduce interest rates, thereby taking the pressure off the pound, is by significantly raising the ceiling on his inflation target. No one wants that, do they?

What about that old chestnut much beloved of amateur economists, that the Chancellor should be cooling the economy by being tougher fiscally, removing the need for any further monetary tightening? The Chancellor could certainly have done more in the Budget. If he's going to abolish tax relief on mortgages, for instance, now would have been the time to do it. Nobody would have been unduly surprised or upset by it. But actually, there is already a very significant fiscal tightening in progress and it is not clear that to have been tougher still would have pushed the pound lower. The reality could easily have been the reverse.

This needs explaining. When the pound first started climbing, I put it all down to the interest rate cycle. It was a temporary, cyclical thing, I said, no more than a hiccup in sterling's historic decline. I was wrong about this. Interest rates are a part of the story, but there has also been a sea change in the attitude of international capital, which is being attracted to these shores by the perceived health and strength of our economy,

if Gordon Brown had been tougher still, that perception might have been strengthened further. Far from falling, the pound would have strengthened even more.

So it's not clear that the Chancellor could do anything. Nor in my view should he. The evidence of recession in manufacturing industry is at best ambivalent. Exchange rates are obviously an important factor in determining international competitiveness, but productivity, investment and costs are the key. Some of the highest pay awards of the last year have been in manufacturing. Not much sign of pain there.

Meanwhile some other areas of the economy, notably services, stock and property values, are experiencing near boom conditions. Right now, the UK economy needs lower interest rates like a hole in the head. Nor is apparent that we need a lower pound. If the strong pound is a reflection of the underlying strength of our economy, then we should all feel glad about it.

IT WAS Robert Hanson's £500,000 payoff that grabbed the headlines when Hanson PLC published its annual report and accounts recently, and justifiably so. What Mr Hanson did to justify his salary while there was hard enough to understand, let alone how he came to deserve such a splendid going away present.

But the accounts are worth close scrutiny for another reason too. This is not because they are illuminating in the normal sense of the word. Far from it. It is because despite the demerger of the old Hanson conglomerate into four "focused", easy to understand parts, of which this building materials group is one, the accounts remain a masterpiece of obfuscation and leading edge creativity.

Even with the mind of an Einstein, you'd be hard pressed to penetrate these accounts. Another of Lord Hanson's hallmarks lies on in his offspring too. For reasons not explained, the accounts continue to be audited by the Hull branch of Ernst & Young. I've got nothing against Hull and if accountants are to be judged by their ability to confuse, then Hull plainly has some highly accomplished members of the profession. All the same, it seems a little perplexing for an international business with annual sales of nearly £3bn.

However, even a mind as unsophisticated as mine is capable of seeing through some of the techniques used to bolster the balance sheet. Net current assets, a key indicator for bankers and investment analysts in assessing solvency, are boosted by £23m to £98.2m by the reallocation of tax from current to deferred liabilities. Not very clever really, but it does the trick. The previous year Hanson injected the drug intravenously by taking £160m of tax provisioning

straight into the profit and loss account. Presumably that £23m, once it has spent a year or two in the purgatory of deferred liabilities, will be heading the same way.

These handy, not so little, provisions, seem to be a leftover from the great tax avoidance (sorry, planning) exercises Hanson used to run through Panama and other offshore centres during the glory years of the great conglomerate. The tax would have been provided for in the balance sheet, just in case. As time passes and it becomes clear there is little possibility of the taxman being able to claim his own, it can be fed back into profits.

If Hanson's accounts are sufficiently clear to allow sight of a wheeze like this, it is only possible to speculate on what else lies hidden beneath the surface. Professor Sir David Tweedie at the Accounting Standards Board has made commendable progress in harmonising accounting practice and limiting the opportunity for window dressing of accounts after the abuses of the 1980s, but for most of us the inner workings of the balance sheet and p&l remain as mysterious and impenetrable as ever. Oh, and another thing about Hanson: it's still only paying 17.5 per cent tax on its profits, little more than half the UK's official rate which, as Gordon Brown keeps telling us, is now the lowest in the developed world. Nice to see that some things never change.

France bars arms link-up

By Michael Harrison

THE CREATION of a European aerospace and defence giant capable of taking on the Americans is being frustrated by the state ownership of France's leading player, Aerospatiale.

The four partners in Airbus - British Aerospace, Daimler-Benz, Aerospatiale and CASA of Spain - yesterday announced they had agreed to the formation of a unified company bringing together all their civil and military aerospace activities.

But in a report to the governments of the four countries they also said that "significant further work remains to be done to establish the feasibility" of such a merged company. They also failed to put a timetable on when the merger might take place.

"Frankly, it is now up to the French government," said one industry source. "If we are to move forward it has to clarify its position. This single company has to be run to make money and the best way to guarantee that is not to have any government involved as a shareholder."

Aerospatiale is 100 per cent owned by the French government. Earlier this week, Alan Richard, the French defence minister, said he did not believe its state

ownership should be an obstacle to a European-wide restructuring.

The report from the four Airbus partners came in response to a joint statement from the British, French and German governments last December calling for a firm plan and timetable for restructuring by 31 March.

Observers suggested at the time that the governments' deadline was unrealistic given the need to overcome the seemingly intractable ownership problem.

The industrial partners nevertheless said the report reflected "a wide measure of agreement in principle on the objectives, scope and operational structure" of the merged company. Other defence groups, notably Alenia, Saab, Dassault and Lagardere/Matra, would be invited to take part in the restructuring.

In a joint statement George Robertson, Defence Secretary, and Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade, said they welcomed the wide measure of agreement that had been achieved but noted that further work was needed.

They added that urgent restructuring of Europe's defence industry was essential if it was to be globally competitive.



Paying the price: Eurostar track fees may soar

Photograph: Paulo Macarico

£400m shaved off high-speed rail link

By Randeep Ramesh

JOHN PRESCOTT, the Deputy Prime Minister, confirmed yesterday that the high-speed Channel Tunnel Rail Link could be built in two phases with the taxpayer footing the extra cost of the project.

It is understood the additional subsidy required by London & Continental Railways, the consortium charged with building the link, is £400m less than £1.2bn which executives asked for earlier this year.

Mr Prescott also extended the deadline for the decision on the rail link for another 60 days. The future of the 68-mile link into St Pancras station, London, was thrown into doubt in January when Mr Prescott turned down a request for a further £1.2bn of public subsidy on top of the £1.8bn already agreed.

Although Sir Derek Hornby and Adam Mills are likely to lose their respective jobs as chairman and chief executive, LCR will be retained as the vehicle used to build the line - in order to avoid a lengthy re-tendering process.

Under the new plans, Railtrack will own the high speed

link. Bechtel, one of the original shareholders in LCR, will be the prime contractor and a consortium of National Express, British Airways and the French railway SNCF would take over the Eurostar service.

The phased construction on the link would see the first section from the Channel Tunnel to Ebbsfleet in North Kent built without public subsidy. This section would then be "bought" by Railtrack from BA Eurostar is likely to lose £600m until 2001, when it is projected to be profitable.

Railtrack's plan would see the company recovering its costs by charging large access fees to Eurostar. At present, the train company pays about £35m a year to use the tracks. The fees could be up to £250m a year.

Mr Prescott said that the new proposals "do not yet meet the Government's requirements". He added both LCR and Railtrack agreed further "significant improvements" can be made in reducing the cost to the taxpayer, increasing the risk borne by the private sector and providing "sufficient incentive to ensure the construction of the whole of the CTRL is completed.

Sir Derek and Mr Mills are on one-year contracts and these will be honoured when the two men leave. Mr Mills is thought to have been paid around £200,000 last year and Sir Derek about £100,000.

If the second section is completed, LCR would only finish the entire link from the Channel Tunnel via Stratford to St Pancras in 2008, five years after the scheduled start of services.

The failure of the original bid has also meant that the Eurostar service could return to public hands. However, LCR would like ministers to franchise the operation to a consortium of National Express, British Airways and SNCF, the French national railway.

However, Virgin is also bidding to run Eurostar trains, raising the possibility of Richard Branson facing another tussle with BA. Eurostar is likely to lose £600m until 2001, when it is projected to be profitable.

Railtrack's plan would see the company recovering its costs by charging large access fees to Eurostar. At present, the train company pays about £35m a year to use the tracks. The fees could be up to £250m a year.

The original CTRL plan would have cut about 25 minutes off the 65-minute journey time into London for commuters from outer Kent. This will not happen if only the first stage of the CTRL is completed.

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There are no suggestions that Mr Scargill or anyone else has been involved in any impropriety, but that certain procedures had not been followed.

Meetings of the Convalescent Homes trustees were disrupted when Mr Scargill's NUM colleagues on the committee objected to new trustees being nominated by the British Coal Corporation to replace the NUM president.

The British Coal people in turn had boycotted meetings, and the Attorney General, as guardian of the public interest in the charity sector, wants an early resolution to the row.

A SENIOR member of the ruling family of Saudi Arabia is suing Coutts, the Queen's bankers, over hundreds of thousands of pounds in disputed bank charges.

His Excellency Mohammed El Rashid, who has a residence at 258 Brompton Road, London, is said to be "deeply embarrassed" at having to go to law in the dis-

pute. According to sources close to His Excellency, the disputed bank fees only came to his attention in the last year. He has banked with Coutts, the private banking subsidiary of NatWest, since 1983.

He issued a writ this Tuesday, and Coutts has contacted his lawyers with a view to settling the matter as quickly and quietly as possible, according to the sources.

Asked whether the dispute would reach court, a source close to His Excellency said yesterday: "We sincerely hope not. We hope the talks [with Coutts] will reach fruition next week."

His Excellency's writ says that between June 1992 and 1996 he instructed Coutts from time to time to transfer "substantial sums" from his bank account in Switzerland to his various accounts with Coutts, in particular to the Coutts branch at Lower Sloane Street, London via New York.

The writ says: "In total during this period some US\$10,000,000 was transferred and converted to sterling en route."

The writ continues: "The Defendant ... has purported to debit the Plaintiff's account for charges allegedly incurred by him without good cause and without the authority of the Plaintiff."

His Excellency claims that despite repeated requests to Coutts, the bank has failed to account properly to him by providing "a complete, accurate and intelligible account" of his accounts with Coutts.

His Excellency goes on to demand an inquiry "as to what sum, if any, the Defendant has applied towards the payment of charges which were not incurred by the Plaintiff or authorised by him." The writ concludes by demanding that Coutts pays whatever amount is found to be owing, plus interest.

A spokeswoman for Coutts said yesterday: "Client confidentiality means we cannot confirm whether he [His Excellency] is a client of Coutts."

THE Financial Services Authority (FSA) has obtained a wide-ranging ex parte in-



Jim Hodkinson: Pastures new

United News and IPC consider joint ventures

UNITED NEWS & Media has agreed with magazine group IPC - which was bought by British venture capital firm Cimco in January from Reed Elsevier Plc in an £800m MBO - "to investigate potential commercial ventures of mutual benefit". United News, which owns *The Express* and *Daily Star* newspapers, gave no further details of what this might involve. UNM also said David Arculus, its chief operating officer, had left and would become chairman of Severn Trent in July and chairman of IPC Group Ltd in October.

Freedom comes later

THE NUMBER of days Britons have to work just to pay their taxes has risen by two following the Budget on 17 March, according to a think-tank. The right-wing Adam Smith Institute said in its annual post-Budget report that workers' "Tax Freedom Day" - the day they theoretically stop working to pay taxes and keep earnings for themselves - would be 27 May this year. "Brown's July budget pushed Tax Freedom Day to 25 May, 1997. His latest budget adds another two days of hard labour," it said.

Receiver for caravan maker

ABOUT 700 jobs were in the balance last night after ABI Leisure, the caravan and motor home manufacturer, told its bankers to appoint receivers after failing to resolve its financial difficulties. Trading in shares in the group was suspended on Thursday. ABI Leisure reported losses of £5.6m last year and in January announced the departure of Terry Stewart, its group marketing director, who resigned after 23 years at the firm.

Pension surplus for Unilever

UNILEVER, the Anglo-Dutch food group, said yesterday the pension fund for its Dutch employees would pay back surplus money to Unilever over a period of several years. The Progress pension fund holds an excess of 2 billion guilders (£590m), which will be paid to Unilever in annual instalments of 350 million guilders. The company said they will have "no direct influence" on profit. The shares rose 15p to close at 574p.

BMW joins Rolls bidding

THE RACE for Rolls-Royce Motor Cars picked up speed yesterday as German car maker BMW said it had submitted a bid to counter an offer from rival Volkswagen. "Our offer is out," a BMW spokesman said. He declined to give further details. BMW has long said it wants the British luxury car company, but not at any price, warning the purchase would have to be economically viable. VW made an offer for Rolls on Tuesday but declined to put a value on it.

Capital buys in Birmingham

CAPITAL & Regional Properties is buying the Palladium shopping centre in Birmingham for £9.8m further building up its portfolio of large shopping centres. Capital & Regional said it would pay for the purchase in part with £5.1m raised through a rights offering of 21.8 million new shares.

COMPANY RESULTS

	Turnover £	Pre-tax £	EPS	Dividend
Antelope Holdings (SPR)*	103.1m (73.8m)	5.8m (2.4m)	17.5p (9.0p)	
British Estate (P)	(-)	37.9m (95.12m)	13.5p (12.01p)	0.3p (0.0p)
Dragon Health Care (D) (3.76m)	0.34m (0.269m)	3.3p (4.4p)	0.05p (0.0p)	
Eco (F)	189.0m (215.7m)	-3.14m (18.12m)	-4.8p (6.4p)	0.05p (0.0p)
Finsbury (F)	3.78m (5.33m)	0.48m (0.478m)	0.3p (12.4p)	3.0p (3.0p)
James Group (F)	81.04m (58.6m)	12.5m (1.02m)	14.7p (8.8p)	
Lengland Group (F)	8.10m (2.05m)	0.23m (0.211m)	0.23p (0.06p)	0.25p
Robert (F)	82.8m (92.8m)	22.3m (17.7m)	16.1p (1	



SPORT

Saturday 28 March 1998

Mettle detectors head for Highbury

Football

By Guy Hodgson

A STRAW that Alex Ferguson was able to claw from Manchester United's defeat against Arsenal a fortnight ago was that his opponents will no longer be able to hide under a cloak of anonymity. The heavy burden of anticipation will now be on Arsène Wenger's team.

Today is the first occasion the Gunners will emerge from the tunnel with genuine championship aspirations and winning now will be an altogether different thing. An anxiety to do well will colour every thought.

"I looked in people's faces

and saw fear in their eyes," Tony Parkes, the Blackburn assistant manager, said recalling his side's run-in to the title three years ago. "At that point it has nothing to do with ability."

Arsenal's mettle detection begins with Sheffield Wednesday at Highbury today which will be the first of a minimum 11 games in six weeks. "We can't try any harder," Lee Dixon said, "but we relish hard work and we don't want to be wasted by throwing away silly games."

Wednesday, who are 13th and have won only twice away this season, can safely be ascribed to the "silly" category but after that there are few fixtures that even approach the

mildly amusing. Arsenal face Bolton, Blackburn, Barnsley, Liverpool and Aston Villa on their travels while, at Highbury, Newcastle, Wimbledon, Derby and Everton are fixtures where points could easily be dropped.

Having a three-game advantage over Manchester United is all very well if you can wipe out the six-point arrears between the teams. That is easier said than done. "United have slipped up but I can't see them slipping up many more times," said Michael Hughes, who will get a close-up examination of the champions' form with Wimbledon at Old Trafford today. "If I were a betting man I'd go with United.

"Arsenal have gone on a great run but I thought the results they got against us was lucky. It's in their hands but I can't see them winning the eight or nine matches they'll need. If they do then they'll deserve to win the League."

What will be decisive is the number of first-choice players Weegar and Ferguson will be able to field for the climax and, on that count, both had reasons to be cheerful yesterday. Although Emmanuel Petit is out with a leg injury incurred playing for France in Russia, Arsenal could have Tony Adams and Ray Parlour fit as compensation.

United, meanwhile, may welcome back Ryan Giggs and Peter

Schmeichel against Wimbledon. Even Teddy Sheringham's one-month suspension is offset by Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's acceleration towards his best form. The Norwegian scored for his country against Belgium in midweek and also got the goal in the 1-1 draw with Monaco 10 days ago.

"They're bound to be on a bit of a downer after going out of the European Cup," Hughes said, "but oo the flip side they now know they've just got the League to go for."

That has been the case for Liverpool for some time now and their fixture at Oakwell will have a big influence on whether their Premiership's finale is exciting or a chore. They have

won only one of their last eight League games but a slip-up by the top two and suddenly their Champions' League qualification will look less remote.

That presupposes they beat Barnsley which they distinctly failed to do at Anfield in November for what is still the shock of the Premiership this season. The home side, too, are riding on an unprecedented crest of three successive wins.

Their players have the advantage of not having travelled the length and breadth of Europe in international friendlies, which is fortunate because they were close to exhaustion after beating Southampton 4-3 a fortnight ago. They have

the intervening time summing themselves in Majorca.

"The players were jaded at that point," the Barnsley manager, Danny Wilson, said.

"Hopefully the break will have proved beneficial and revitalised them ready for what's going to be a tough last few weeks."

Four other matches today will also help to clarify or muddy the relegation waters. Bolton have the opportunity to build on their win over Sheffield Wednesday at home to Leicester. Everton and Aston Villa will attempt to be big clubs in deed as well as reputation at Goodison while Newcastle will be hoping to be worthy of their overpriced shirts away to Southampton.

The game that has six-pointer running through the centre of it, however, is at Selhurst Park where Crystal Palace probably have to beat Tottenham to have any prospect of staying the Premiership. Lose and they will be eight points behind Spurs, who will be without the suspended David Ginola; win and the gap will be down to two.

Antonio Lombardo's appointment as manager has coincided with a sudden surge of fitness. The Italian is available himself while Michele Padovano, Neil Shipperley and Paul Warhurst are either recovered or nearly so. Add £1m signing Sasa Ceric and suddenly Palace do not look quite so hapless.

Protests cannot dent McLaren's superiority

Motor racing

By David Tremayne
in São Paulo

It took Mika Häkkinen only three laps yesterday morning to underscore Ron Dennis's contention that the controversial brake bias system used on his McLaren cars is but a part of their present performance advantage.

Though they were forced to run without the system, following protests which had again thrown the sport into further confusion on Thursday night, Häkkinen and David Coulthard dominated the first session of free practice with an insouciant ease that left the rest trailing more than a second and a half behind.

Ferrari carried out their threat to protest about McLaren's brake system which allows their drivers to apply different retardational pressure to either rear wheel in corners, enhancing cornering efficiency and grip. The key issue is whether the track's regulations which preclude four-wheel steering.

Jean Todt, Ferrari's sporting director, had expressed his concern over the system in Melbourne three weeks ago, during the Australian Grand Prix which McLaren dominated. With Tyrrell he lodged an official protest against McLaren as

well as the Williams and Jordan teams which have similar systems. At the same time Arrows protested against McLaren and Williams, and Sauber and Minardi protested against Jordan.

Todt reiterated his misgivings yesterday: "We think the McLaren system has a four-wheel steering function. We want to clarify what is legal according to the technical regulations and what is not."

This is seco not so much as a protest primarily against McLaren, though there are already bad feelings between the team following Ron Dennis' thinly veiled attack on the Italian team in Australia, but against the world governing body FIA and the manner in which it determines the legality of ideas presented by individual teams.

Yesterday Dennis continued to defend his system, although it had been removed on the advice of the FIA pending a meeting between the teams and the FIA stewards later yesterday evening. "Throughout the winter we have been in constant dialogue with the FIA regarding our technical ideas, and we are confident that everything we have incorporated into our new car is fully legal.

The protest is time-consuming and a bit annoying, but clearly Ferrari is satisfied with the interpretation of the

rules and there is a process by which they can challenge that process. I find it strange that they would want to do that, since we have complied with the system in question via endless communication.

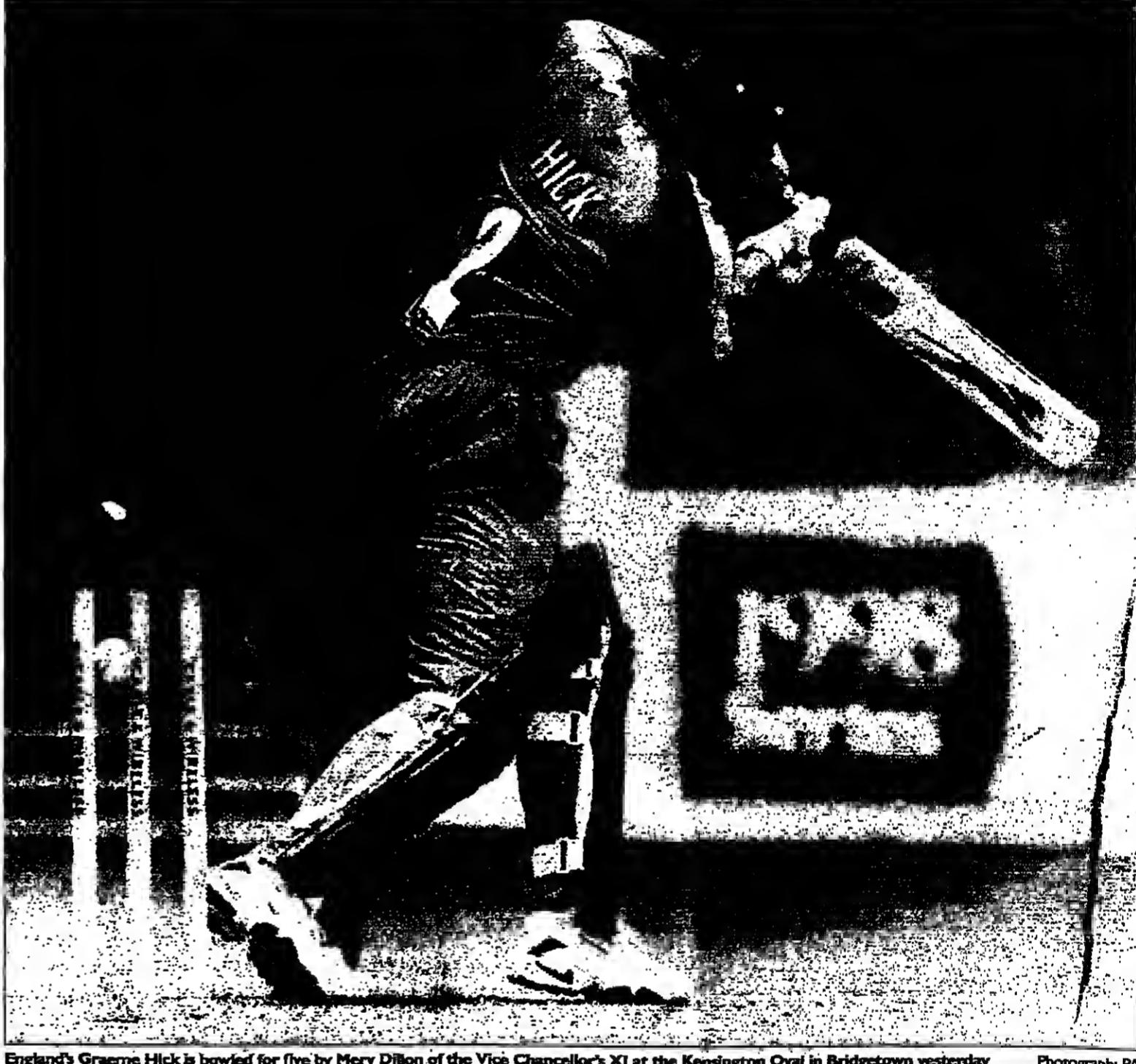
"We will pursue the matter to the Court of Appeal if necessary. The rule book is two inches thick and we face fresh constraints every year. So if we find something within them that gives us an advantage, who on earth should anyone be surprised that we don't want to divulge any details on how it works to anybody else?

Those teams who want to know will find out if they challenge the system, but I do not believe that the FIA thinks the Court of Appeal is the best system by which to establish the legality of a car. The system for that already exists, and we followed it to the letter."

Ferrari, for one, clearly do not share that view.

When practice resumed yesterday Coulthard and Häkkinen traded places but retained their comfortable supremacy.

It remains to be seen whether the McLarens were grandstanding in outright qualifying set-up to prove a point, but few doubt their superiority will continue in official qualifying today.



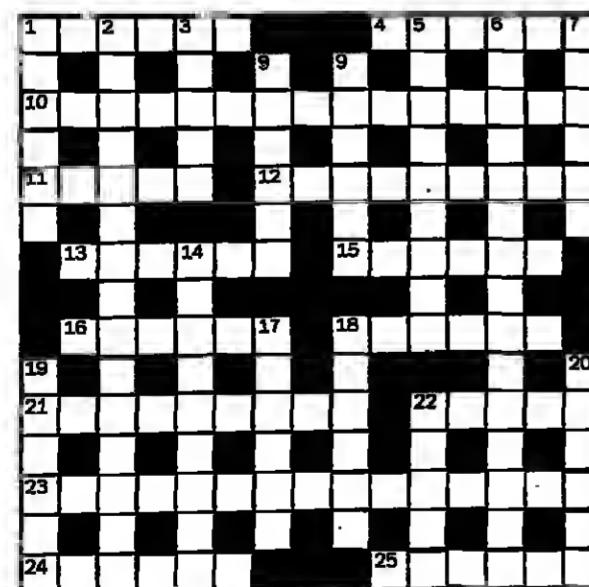
England's Graeme Hick is bowled over by Merv Dillon of the Vice Chancellor's XI at the Kensington Oval in Bridgetown yesterday

Photograph: PA

THE INDEPENDENT CROSSWORD

No. 3570, Saturday 28 March

By Mass



Friday's solution

Last Saturday's solution

WEDNESDAY SPEECH **T**HURSDAY SPACEMAN
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The first five correct solutions to this week's puzzle, open to Thursday readers, will receive a copy of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations. Answers and winners' names will be published next Saturday. Send solutions to Saturday Crossword, P.O. Box 4013, The Independent, 1 Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London E14 5BL. Please use the box number and postcode and give your own postcode. Last week's winners: G Smith, Reading; J Polley, Motherwell; M Hicks, London NW2; M Wallace, Fife; M Dickson, Matlock.

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Saturday 28 March 1998 Registered as a newspaper with the Post Office

Stewart run spree ends in controversy after umpire fails to spot Rose no-ball

Cricket

By Mark Baldwin
in Barbados

ALEC STEWART'S 108 ended in controversial circumstances here yesterday as England tallied 289 for 7 in their one-day warm-up match against a Vice Chancellor's XI.

Stewart, who put on 157 in 26 overs with England's one-day captain, Adam Hollioake, to revive England's innings, was bowled taking a huge swipe at Franklyn Rose because he thought it would be signalled a no-ball by the umpire, Halley Moore.

But Moore ignored Stewart's appeal that only three fielders were inside the 30-yard fielding ring - a minimum of four is required in 50-over cricket - and the England coach, David Lloyd, had a word with the officials to try to clarify the situation. England's management later said that they had accepted the umpire's decision.

Stewart, who had repeatedly gestured to the umpires after being given out, walked off shaking his head in disgust. The wicketkeeper, who was England's top scorer in the recent Test series against the West Indies, hit 14 fours in a

responsible but fluent 123-ball innings.

Holloake had immediately recomposed himself as England's leader in the shortened game with a 78-ball 76 that included a six out of the ground off Merv Dillon that took him to his half-century.

The Surrey pair ensured a sizeable England total, after an initial slide to 59 for 3, and in the final overs Dougrie Brown and Robert Croft laid about the bowling to add 33 more runs.

Not even the sore back of Graham Thorpe meant Mike Atherton could find a place in the side that was so successful when they won the Sharjah Trophy in December.

Angus Fraser took the place of the left-hander and with Ben Hollioake in for the absent Alastair Brown it meant nine of

the victorious side were playing.

With their policy of packing the side with all-rounders it also meant that two players who have opened for their countries in one-day cricket - Matthew Fleming and Croft - came in at eight and nine.

Stewart and his fellow opener Nick Knight, who captained England A in Sri Lanka earlier this winter, set off at a fierce pace. Stewart took three fours off the second over, bowled by the South African guest fast bowler Victor Mpitsang.

Knight also hit three quick boundaries, off Rose, before edging a drive and being well caught behind by a diving Jeff Dujon for 14.

Dujon was one of three former West Indies Test players in this match. The Jamaican

wicketkeeper was joined by openers Gordon Greenidge and Desmond Haynes, aged 46 and 42 respectively.

By the time Ben Hollioake joined Stewart in the third over, England were already 20 for 1 after being put into bat.

The younger Hollioake, brother, fresh from a super tour with bat in Sri Lanka, promised much with a couple of sumptuous strokes, but on nine he tried to whip Mpitsang off his pads and was held back of square.

Hick, one of six players to arrive for the one-day leg of the tour that comprises of five games against the West Indies - the first of which is here tomorrow - had made just five when he was bowled off an inside edge driving at Dillon.

Vice Chancellor's XI won toss

ENGLAND
N V Knight c Dujon b Rose 14
A J Stewart c Rose 108
G C Thorpe c Tuckett b Mpitsang 5
G A Hick b Dillon 5
M A Esham c Tuckett b Mpitsang 5
D R Brown not out 5
M D Fleming c Tuckett 5
R O B Croft not out 5
Extras (612, w, nob4) 55
Total (for 7, 40 overs) 289
PAI 1-28, 2-48, 3-53, 4-216, 5-229, 6-246,
7-256
Did not bat D W Hooper, A R C Frease,
Bowlings: Rose 10-6-52-5, Mpitsang 10-1-50-7, Tuckett 10-0-47-0, Sammer 10-0-73-1.

VICE CHANCELLOR'S XI C G Greenidge, D L Hill, M P Tuckett, C Tuckett, P A J L Dulon, M B Hussain, C Hussain, P A J Hussain, M V Dillon, F A Ross, V Mpitsang, Umpires: H Morris and M Jones.

TODAY
11 PAGES OF SPORT
BEGIN ON PAGE 16

ON MONDAY
24-PAGE TABLOID
SPORTS SECTION



TIME OFF

TRAVEL, LEISURE & SPORT

Saturday 28 March 1998



PICTURE OF THE WEEK Spring by Brian Harris. To order a 12x9in print (price £5) call 0171-293 2534

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uranteed.

Week in, week out

William Hartston
reveals how God
foiled a plot by
American Italians to
corner the market in
pineapples using
elephant dung

God did not appear on television this week. Italian men are having to be taught how to seduce women. The clocks go forward tonight. It has been a terrible week for elephants.

To my casual browser of this week's news, these stories may seem unconnected. Yet a deeper analysis of the issues behind them suggests some compelling links.

Let us start with the elephants. On Monday, a burned carcass of a wild elephant was found in Thailand, a suspected victim of the summering

war between elephants and pineapple-growers. Police are looking for suspects who may have been involved in the elephant's death.

Perhaps they could try this tusk-tear-off on the Ivory Coast, which - as our story overleaf explains - moves closer to Gatwick this weekend. And just along the west African coast in Nigeria this week, elephants have been frightening villagers in the town of Yankari by coming close to people's homes and chewing on the baobab trees. Thanks to anti-poaching efforts, the elephant population in the area has doubled in the past 10 years, but conservationists are worried about the growing tension between elephants and villagers.

"There are no community awareness programmes," Briton Aaron Nicholas of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation told Reuters on Thursday. "The communities get no benefits from the elephants and no benefits from the park."

Surely a mutually beneficial deal could be struck between the elephants and farmers to swap fruit for manure?

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"There are no community awareness programmes," Briton Aaron Nicholas of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation told Reuters on Thursday. "The communities get no benefits from the elephants and no benefits from the park."

cause they no longer know how to seduce women. What, you may ask, has this to do with elephants? For the final link we must go back to 19 December 1996. That fateful day marked the first death by herpes of an Asian elephant. The herpes virus had long been common among Asian elephants, but

this fatality in Oakland Zoo, California, was the first in the African species. Oakland zookeepers were said to be "at a loss to explain" how he had contracted the virus, although an Asian elephant had not long before died from herpes at the same zoo.

Everything suddenly fits: is it really so far-fetched to suggest that the Italians had been surreptitiously practising their seduction teaching methods on elephants before risking them on humans? The African elephant had become an expert in seduction, but paid for his expertise with his life, after picking up herpes from an Asian conquer. With the passage of time, all Nigerian elephants have become experts at seduction, which is why their population has been growing so rapidly. And all because the Italian-Americans wanted to corner the world market in pineapples by securing unlimited supplies of elephant dung.

The elephantine herpes, however, may be seen as divine retribution, because 1996 was also the year when milk supplies ran out in northern India as the Hindu faithful took gallons of the stuff to a statue of the elephant god Ganesha, which had supposedly been seen drinking milk.

And that may provide the link with the other major story of the week: the non-arrival, on Channel 18 in the United States, of God. According to Hon-Ming Chen, leader of a 150-member Taiwanese spiritual sect, God was to have appeared on television immediately after midnight on Wednesday morning to announce that he would descend to earth next week at 10am on 31 March in the Dallas suburb of Garland. So certain were the sect that many members, including Chen himself, had bought up property in the Garland area. When the television programmes proceeded as normal, Chen emerged from his home to tell reporters he had

been wrong. "Since God's appearance on television has not been realised," he said through an interpreter, "you can take what we have preached as nonsense. I would rather you don't believe what I say any more." He does, however, still believe that God will descend to earth to save hundreds of millions of people from a nuclear holocaust in 1999 by taking them to another planet in flying saucers.

But what if he was watching for the wrong god? Perhaps, with all this pineapple business and the Nigerian elephant overpopulation crisis, it was Ganesha they should have been expecting. And perhaps they got the time wrong. If an Indian elephant god makes a try to meet a Taiwanese sect in America, the timing of the appointment is a potential source of great misunderstanding. Especially in the week the clocks change. Did anyone spot an elephant on American television last Tuesday night, I wonder?

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SIMON CALDER

Faster planes for UK flyers! From tomorrow, the journey time on many flights from Manchester to Heathrow will be cut. The early morning British Airways Shuttle flight shaves 15 minutes off the previous schedule, cutting the journey time to just an hour. Has BA decided to put its much-underused Concorde on the route?

"No," says a spokesman for the airline. "Minor adjustments are always made at the changeover from winter to summer schedules".

Is it merely a coincidence that these improvements are being made on exactly the same day that British Airways loses its monopoly on the Manchester-Heathrow route? Tomorrow, British Midland starts eight flights a day between the two airports. The new airline plans a journey time as short as 55 minutes; BA denies that it is trimming published schedules just to challenge the new competition, even though it will be using exactly the same Boeing and flying to precisely the same overcrowded airport as before.

Travellers from Scotland will find their services on British Midland curtailed because of the new route and subsequent transfer of resources. But do we really need all these alternatives? In the past six months, travellers between Manchester and the capital have acquired the added choice of four flights from London City on KLM UK, as well as 16 Virgin trains and a wayward Wales & West service every day – not to mention numerous National Express buses.

It's not as if the head-to-head competition between BA and British Midland is having a dramatic effect on fares; if you want to travel from London to Manchester and back next weekend, the lowest fare on both airlines is £88 (more than four times the cheapest rail ticket).

As these two pages reveal, British Airways is expanding its flights from Gatwick, including a new service to Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire. Yet I believe this latter route is in fact a re-establishment of an earlier service. British Caledonian (catch line, until the takeover by BA: "We never forget you have a choice") used to operate to West Africa.

When I was a security guard frisking passengers at Gatwick airport in the late Seventies, it was easy to envy travellers jetting off to the four corners of the world. The only ones I felt sorry for were those cramming aboard a tiny BAC 1-11, destination Abidjan. This was not the non-stop that British Airways starts flying tomorrow, but an "all stations to Africa" service that called, if memory serves me right, at Madrid, Tangier, Dakar, Banjul and Accra. Did anyone ever travel on this, and are they back yet? Let me know.

My Continental Airlines flight to Mexico for the report on Cancún was a little late leaving Gatwick, but the choice of what Americans call "de-planing music" seemed unnecessarily self-critical: Carlyle King's greatest hit, "It's Too Late". Looking at the airline's Go Forward plan to "Make Reliability a Reality", I remembered why punctuality is a company obsession: "Employees receive a \$100 bonus for any month when Continental ranks first in on-time arrivals".

2/TRAVEL: NEW DESTINATIONS

Tinkling along the Ivory

Once he cut through the masses of red tape, Stephen Wells found a warm African welcome in the former French colony of Côte d'Ivoire

The airport official had a pistol at his side, and we looked menacing. Tentatively I pleaded: "But my guidebook said I didn't need a visa." Unimpressed, he led me into his office. They said Africa was all about meeting people, but this was probably not what they had in mind. French is the official language of this ex-colony, so I tried to resurrect my A-level skills and searched in my phrase book for "I'm new around here. Let me know when I am supposed to bribe you, monsieur."

I paid for my error in time rather than money. After a few hours of mind-melting bureaucracy, I was allowed out on condition that I spent the next two days visiting every civil service department in town, collecting all manner of stamps and signatures.

Outside the airport that will welcome the first DC-10 direct from Gatwick tomorrow, Côte d'Ivoire is a vivacious country bursting with energy. The people are complete jokers, the sun shines, and it is a fresh fruit fiesta. Men wear long robes called *boubous* and the women are wrapped in endless tracts of dazzling material. A few surprises have to be expected, though. Not many people come here, so the guidebooks can be rather dated. You are more likely to bump into Andy Kershaw than Jill Dando.

I began my walking tour of Abidjan, hoping to take in some of the other attractions apart from the government offices. This, the most prosperous French colony, used to be called the Paris of West Africa. It is a modern city with skyscrapers, supermarkets and traffic jams.

There are plenty of reasonable places to stay for just a few pounds. If you want opulence, then there is the famous Hôtel Ivoire for about £50 a night. The city is next to a 100-mile-long lagoon, on the other side of which is the old capital of Grand Bassam. Here there are limitless stretches of tranquil Atlantic beaches with faded colonial houses among the palm trees. The sleepy remains of a bygone era give the place a relaxing, timeless air.

Although it is called the "Ivory Coast", there are not the masses of wildlife that you find in East Africa. The main attraction is meeting people and this is best done away from Abidjan. So, visas in hand, my friend and I abandoned luxury and headed inland. We found a gradual transition in washing facilities, from *en-suite* bathrooms to *en-corridor* bathrooms to *en-bucket* bathrooms. The road system was good, though, and we took a bus for 150 miles for 2,000CFA (about £3).

Most countries in what used to be French West Africa have the CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) as their currency. French francs can be changed anywhere, but outside Abidjan you may as well throw away your dollars, sterling and traveller's cheques.

We bought a wooden set of African backgammon called *awali* and acquired a never-ending source of friends.

If French had not been widely spoken then we would have been lost, since every town seems to have its own local language.

INTO THE IVORY COAST



Getting there
The new British Airways non-stop flight from Gatwick to Abidjan begins tomorrow and operates on Wednesdays and Sundays thereafter.

The lowest official fare direct from the airline is £902, but through discount agents such as Bridge the World (0171-911 0900) it is being sold for £539 (including taxes) from April to June.

More information
British passport holders require a visa. To get one, write to the Embassy of the Côte d'Ivoire, 2 Upper Belgrave Street, London SW1 (0171-235 6991). You must complete two application forms, supply two photographs and pay £40.

Ivorians are hospitable bunch, and we were invited to stay with several families. We were served a traditional meal of *atéki* (a cassava tuber dried, grated and steamed into submission to produce a type of couscous). It is meant to be eaten with the hands. This was clearly impossible, so we entertained our hosts by making an irredeemable mess of our clothes, then wiping ourselves down with some disposable traveller's cheques.

For dessert there was fried plantain. The huge fruit are like savoury bananas on steroids.

Then we left for Yamoussoukro, which became the capital 15 years ago. Houphouët-Boigny (let's call him Hoofy for now), the president from independence in 1960 until his death in 1993, decided that it would be nice to have his home village as capital. I guess it made juggling state commitments and visiting the relatives easier. He ploughed a vast amount of money into it, but all my favourite government departments have stayed in Abidjan.

The city has a presidential palace, surrounded by a crocodile-filled moat, and a virtually empty luxury hotel called (surprisingly) Hotel President. The most amazing construction here is the basilica. It is almost identical to St Peter's in the Vatican, and is the tallest church in Christendom. It is a bizarre sight, rising out of the African bush. It cost a staggering £200m and has 36 stained-glass windows, hand-blown by the best makers in France, stretching up 30 metres from the floor. If you foolishly think that Africa is nothing but mud huts, then this is the place to come.

Out of the equatorial sun, we relished the air conditioning, whilst admiring the beautiful marble and granite. Finding a free seat was no problem: there were 7,000 of them, and only a handful of people worshipping.

Since Hoofy's death, there has been a relatively smooth transition to a democratically elected leader with more down-to-earth ideas and a more pronounceable surname.

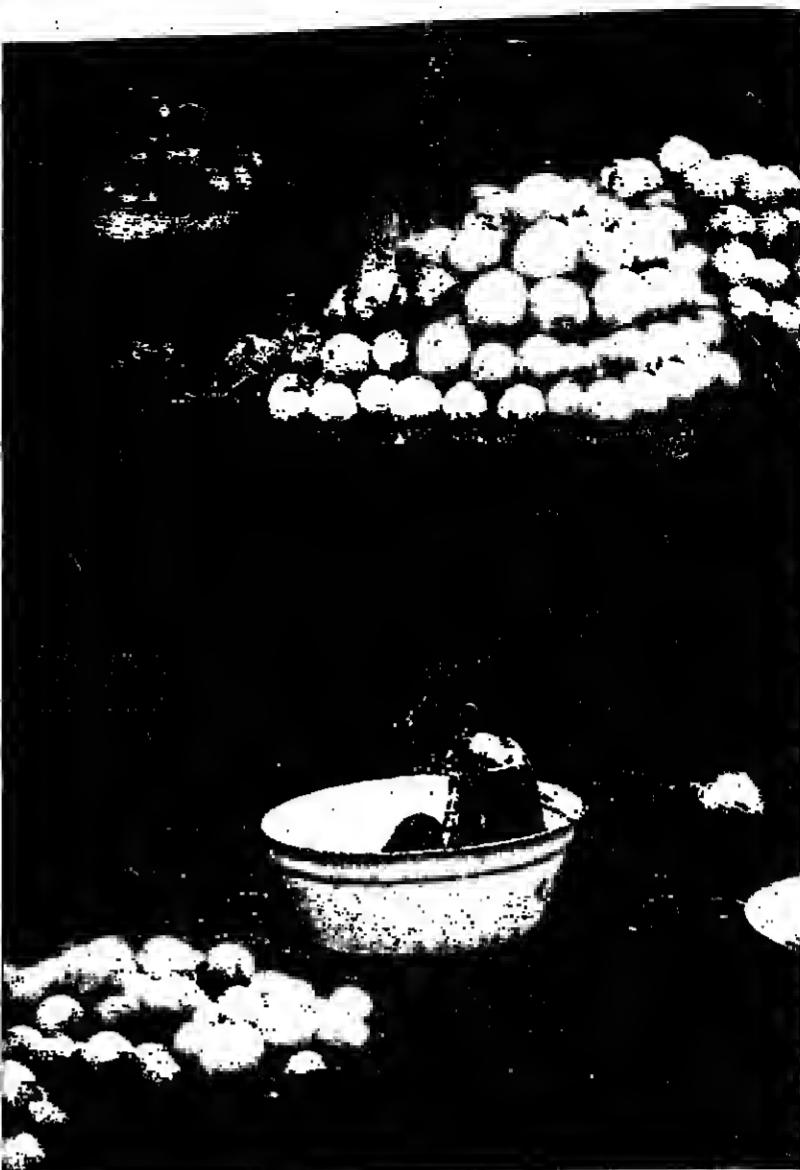
To travel further north we took the train. Its state of repair has freewheeled downhill for many years but it is still called the Express (that Ivorian humour again). The scenery changes from patches of rainforest to open savannah. Sellers assault the train at every station and women come up with mountainous trays of mangoes on their heads. When the sun beats down, a mango hat is definitely worth having. You can buy your own body weight of bananas for next to nothing, provided you are not paying in dollars.

The train journey was rather confusing since all towns seem to end in "dougou". We passed Ngolodougou, Komborodougou and Ferkessidougou. The train was heading for Ouagadougou, across the border in Burkina Faso, but we got off at Onangolodougou, solely on the grounds of its having, to our Western eyes, the most ridiculous name.

One day there will be souvenir stands here selling T-shirts with "I've taken the Ouangolodougou choo-choo". Neatly there are bustling markets, where we haggled for carved wooden masks and painted cloth. It is a nice area to while away the time and perfect for a break of eating *iné*. If you have not yet admitted defeat and accepted the spoon offered to foreigners.

Eventually we reached the border with Mali. Land borders are much less hassle than airports. An Ivorian woman on our bus did not have the right papers, so paid for a pilfer ride on the back of a scooter through the bush, and rejoined the road a few miles past the customs post.

Côte d'Ivoire is a rewarding country to visit. The travelling is easy and cheap. The climate is cooler than you may imagine, with temperatures generally only in the high twenties all year round, and you can stay healthy if you take the usual precautions. The people are welcoming, but unless government offices particularly fascinate you, it is probably best to buy a visa before you go.



Faces of the Ivory Coast: the main attraction is meeting people – Abidjan market, top, and fishing port, above

Photographs: Robert Harding

Excellent holiday. That's the one your suitcase had ...

When your luggage gets lost, what does an airline do?
Heap indignity on inconvenience, writes Liz Kershaw

through customs in night attire, with nothing to declare but his embarrassment.

The airline reluctantly suggested he went shopping in London. He could claim back what he spent. Sorry, but his ordeal through Heathrow had convinced him that he wasn't up to a stroll down Oxford Street. He pleaded for a taxi home, but that was refused, and so, with only what he stood up in – white lightweight polycotton with the airline's logo embroidered across his chest – he set out by tube to catch the train to the Midlands. It was raining at Leicester station, and as he tried to get a taxi his corporate casuals became disturbingly clingy and transparent.

Past the fixed grins at the plane door, past the puzzled looks on the long walk to immigration, forced to re-enter Britain in bedwear, all that kept him going was the thought of slipping into something more suitable when he was eventually reunited with his luggage. But guess what? His bag wasn't there. He was forced to stride casually

suitcase had beaten him to it. Located while he was making his case in Terminal 3, it had been whisked home in a nice warm car.

Up to last year I had never fully appreciated the horror of lost luggage. It was something that happened to other people. A bit of a giggle. Made a good story.

Until the day I spent shuffling around the poshest hotel I'd ever been to in my life. I was a paying guest, and should have been enjoying the sparkling pool or a pristine sun lounger. Instead I looked like a bag lady without a bag, because Caymanair had managed to get me to Grand Cayman, but not my clothes.

Then, in Dublin last spring, I spent two days without the bare essentials while Aer Lingus tried to track down my artist's port-

folio. I've never been known to put paint to paper; in fact I was missing a bright red vanity case. It took a few phone calls to sort that out, but I had plenty of time while skulking in my hotel room wishing I'd held on to one of those emergency toothbrushes they give you on planes.

Last November, on a trip to Orkney, my bag full of thermals and sturdy outerwear stayed put at Heathrow while I arrived in Kirkwall in a fancy suit and handbag. It was very windy and very cold. They were not my favourite airline. Next morning, crumpled and smelly, I went shopping.

Recently, as I inched my way bleary-eyed off a flight from Miami, I was invited to make myself known on leaving the aircraft. I was quite excited to be greeted by a grinning guy with a golden tan and easy smile set off by his red and gold *regatta*, looking every inch the game show host. He greeted me enthusiastically. I was enthralled. Was I the lucky winner of a holiday? No. The

game was Spot Your Luggage and their answer to Bob Monkhouse had come to tell me that on that great carousel of fortune in the sky I'd landed on "Lose everything again". All my bags were still in the States. Go direct to baggage reclaim. Do not pass through. Do not collect anything. Go straight home and we'll be in touch.

After a stand-off with a freshly groomed duty manager, with two small, sleepy children clinging to my shorts, and just the bags under my eyes, we went home in a taxi. A couple of calls to customer services, and our cases arrived 31 hours later. The following day came an apology and travel vouchers for £200. Our man in Leicester was eventually offered a trip to New York. Nice – but all we really wanted was a hit of sympathy and practical help at the time of need.

Meanwhile I'm working out where in the world I can go with £200 and one piece of hand baggage.

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Cancún: Mexico's last resort



A brand-new scheduled flight to Mexico's main Caribbean resort opens up the Yucatán Peninsula to travellers. But the excesses on the island drove Simon Calder to drink; tequila, inevitably

Here's a tip for the pilot of the first-ever British Airways' flight from Cancún to Gatwick, which takes off this Monday: do the beach departure. It'll guarantee a plane load of pleased passengers and a placid flight back to Gatwick.

The punters should be content, anyway. Mexico's main Caribbean resort is one of those rare places where, whatever you want from a journey, you will probably find it.

If you desire merely to toast on the beach, tingle by the pool and taste nothing riskier than a burger, stay put on the brash strip of hotels, restaurants and shopping malls that constitutes the Isla Cancún. But allow yourself, and your attention, to drift along the beach past the Sheraton, and you may get caught up in one of the tangled tales of this strange corner of the world: sprouting from an ancient ping of limestone is the Mayan temple of the scorpion. Any-one caring to glance up from their poolside piña colada sees that tourists are trespassing on the territory of one of the world's greatest civilisations.

Some, no doubt, will use the new air route as a stepping-stone to get deeper into Mayan life. But they, too, should dawdle in Cancún and gawp at what passes for civilisation at the back end of the 20th century.

Travel writers are fond of trotting out the truism that Cancún was selected by computer – in the early Seventies, the story goes, the Mexican authorities ran a program to identify the ideal spot to develop tourism on the Caribbean coast. Yet even in those technologically olden days, you wouldn't have needed so much as a Sinclair ZX81 to work out that a 12-mile strip of golden sand with the Caribbean sea on one side and a tropical lagoon on the other might prove to be a pretty good place to plant a resort.

My National Geographic map of the Yucatán Peninsula, dated 1970, shows a blank shred of sand dangling from the eastern-most point in Mexico. By the end of the century Isla Cancún will eclipse Mexico City as the richest, ritziest place in this wide and wonderful country.

Sunglasses are mandatory – first, to defend your eyes against the blazing tropical sun that dances down to play high-energy hopscotch between the ultra-white sand and eerily blue sea; later, to shade the neon that dazzles through the warm breath of a Caribbean dusk. Almost every yard along the spine of the island is filled with heavy-duty tourism infrastructure: dozens of big, brash hotels, interlaced with familiar names, such as the Hard Rock Café and TGI Friday's. A frenzy of feeding, and more particularly drinking, takes place each evening.

Close your eyes and you think you could easily be in Florida; open them again and you will be convinced that you've slipped through a time-space puncture and arrived in the vicinity of Daytona Beach, especially at this time of year, when the "spring break" crowds are in town; these under-21 refugees from harsh US licensing laws take advantage of Mexico's relaxed attitude to alcohol to get sozzled in the sun for a weekend or a week. Forget lager louts; tequila tear-aways are much more intimidating.

You get the strong impression that some of them don't know they're in a foreign country, and regard Mexico as just a wayward US state – they don't even need a passport to get in – if you feel mischievous, conduct a survey among your fellow guests to see if they can identify where they are. "I'm in Nirvana, man," was the closest guess of a Kansas student staggering out of the latest eating/drinking/shopping complex.

Not that I, any ground to feel superior: I'm writing this on the verandah of the Outback Steakhouse, having trawled the length of the island in a vain attempt to find some friendly Mexicans with whom

to drink and dine. Not a single *cantina* has survived the onslaught, so instead of nibbling nachos I am tucking into a banter burger at Cancún's first Australian restaurant. It's time to leave.

Departure takes approximately 30 seconds: the frequency of buses roaring back and forth along the strip. Three pesos (20p), 10 minutes and lots of g-forces later, you cross the bridge to the mainland and are deposited in the town of Cancún – a genuine Mexican community that wisely keeps its distance from the *faux* Florida on the island. The ambient noise here is of animated tiffs rather than amplified riffs. Real dogs scavenge among awkward concrete architecture of the "oh, we'll finish it off later" school of building, while a hilariously Heath Robinson machine in the chunterers out the blank discs of corn that constitute the hub of a Mexican diet: tortillas. On the main square, the sharply defined faces of the descendants of the Maya smile as they offer you said tortillas, deep fried and wrapped around cheeses and chicken.

Along the street at one of a rabble of bars, a friendly local will correct your tequila technique. Forget the lime and salt performance: here, they alternate swigs of the fiery cactus spirit with gulps of sangrita, a spicy tomato concoction. The routine is a bit like mixing a bloody Mary in your stomach, only jollier.

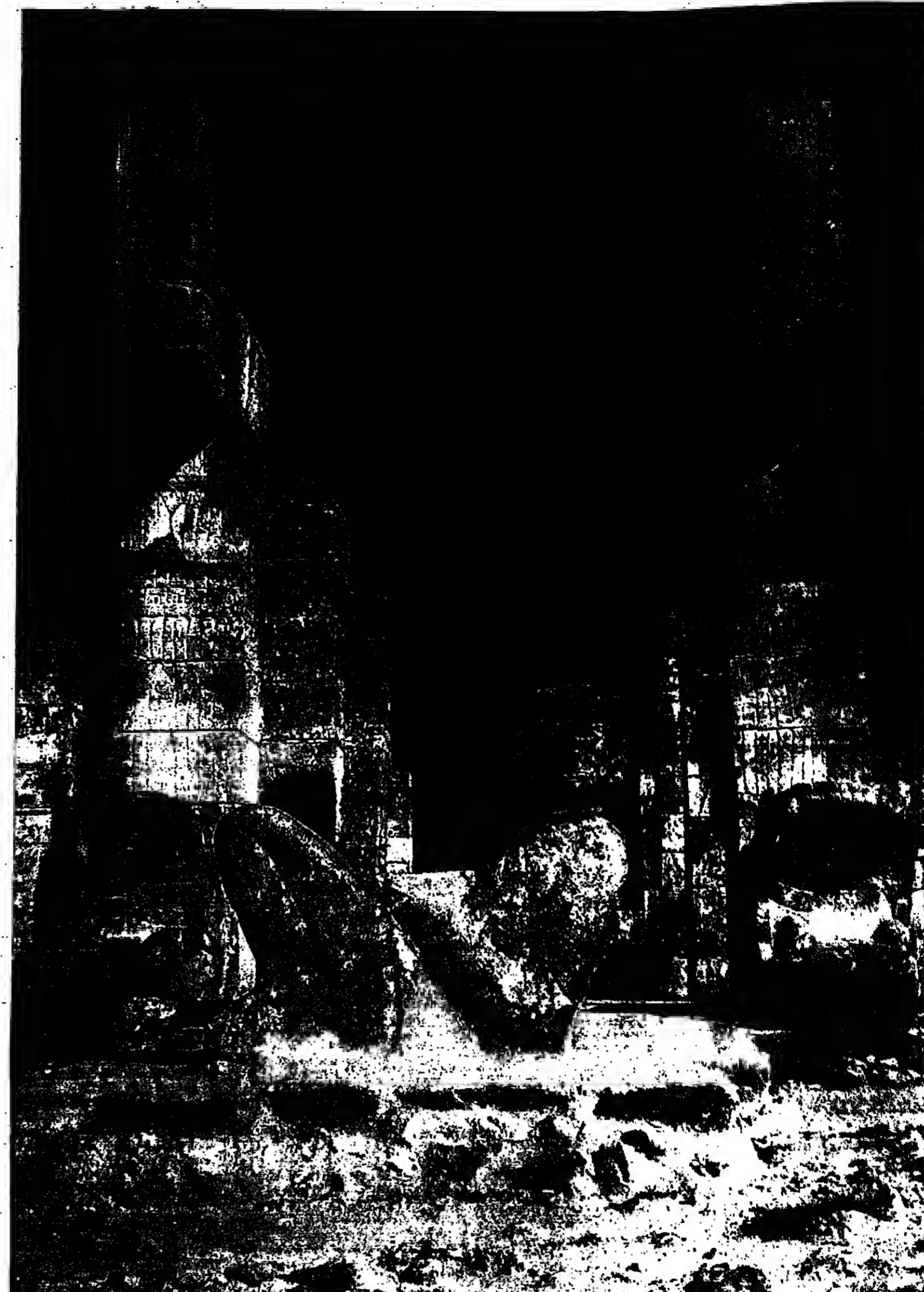
And the vast remainder of Mexico beyond the resort is a bit like Cancún, only much jollier. A 40-minute ferry ride takes you across to pepper-shaped Isla Mujeres: literally the island of women, though the genders seem balanced aboard this spinster of a rock. Unlike the adjacent island, normal life has never relinquished control.

Within moments of landing, you can hear the shrieks from a school playground – and you realise that the artificial resort you have left behind is devoid of such natural phenomena as children. The island's only town looks as though some errant kids have got hold of a giant painting set and plastered each house in increasingly bright colours. Who needs neon when the sun sets alight a dazzling aquamarine apartment block, just along from that impossibly orange cafe? A rare blank wall has been cheered up by a mauve *Viva la revolución*. If you hop only as far as this island, your whole trip will have been worthwhile.

Try, though, the ride along the most boring road in the world. The highway east towards Mérida and Mexico City strides through wearisome uniformity. The Yucatán Peninsula is as flat as a punctured airbed, a slab of low-level limestone dressed in spindly forest at the sunblasted end of the dry season. Now and again the fragile crust collapses to form a *cenote*, a giant and mystically circular well, but such secrets are concealed from the autopista. It drones on for two or three hours before you spot what seems to be a thumbtack appearing on the horizon.

The closer you get, the more your jaw drops at the audacious apparition: the main pyramid at Chichén Itzá, the finest Mayan site in Mexico. Check in at one of the overpriced steeps in the straggly adjacent village of Piste, and rise at dawn. Get to the site five minutes before it officially opens at 8am, and hope that the chaps on the gates let you in a little early. Then sprint to the 80-ft summit of a 1,000-year-old structure, called El Castillo ("the castle") by the awe-struck Spanish conquistadores.

From the top you will gasp – either at the sight of such a perfectly preserved city, or because the 60-degree rake of the steps makes you feel a tad insecure. Your head may also swim at the thought that the features of this pyramid – steps, terraces and panels – are denominated to describe the mathematically meticulous Mayan calendar.



Temple of the Warriors, Chichen Itza, (main picture); a cenote (right), where the fragile limestone crust has collapsed; Cancun Island, ancient and modern (above)

Main photograph, MPL Fogden/Bruce Coleman; above and right, Simon Calder

CANCUN CONNECTIONS

Getting there

Simon Calder paid £455 for a Continental Airlines Gatwick-Cancún ticket, via Houston. The new direct flight on British Airways (0345 222111) costs more than £600 if you book direct, but through agencies such as Journey Latin America (0181-747 3108) the fare for April is £467,

including UK and Mexican taxes. Note that the fare can be combined with a Mexico City flight at the same fare. Charters are also available from Gatwick and Manchester. They are mostly sold as part of package holidays, which

by operators such as First Choice (0161-745 7000), Airtrours (0341 500479) and Thomson (0990 502580).

Red tape

Visitors require a tourist card, which is issued free by the airline, or at the frontier if you enter by land.

More information

Mexican Ministry of Tourism, 60 Trafalgar Square, London WC2N 5DS (0171-734 1058). Note that this office takes a substantial siesta, closing each day from 1.30pm to 3pm.



inch of the way. "See if you can spot your hotel," recommended the captain.

I cheated a bit: looked for the temple of the scorpion instead, and found it towering between giant cathedrals of indulgence. But from this distance, Mexico's last resort took on a uniform magnificence.

At ground level you would scarcely have credited it, but, gradually, even the island of Cancún began to look beautiful.

As the arithmetical city begins to swarm with visitors, join the swirl and try to make sense of the ancient ball courts – gigantic arenas, bigger (and possibly in better nick) than Cancún airport – and civic buildings whose stern formality sneers at the feeble assaults of time and the elements. You will leave Chichen Itzá humbled, acutely aware of just how temporary and shallow are you and your fellow tourists.

Back on the beach at Cancún, anyone gazing skywards may see more aerobatic activity than just a biplane towing a banner proclaiming the beoofus of Pond's cosmetics. At the airport, demand a window seat on the left of the plane and hope for a pilot in a good mood. The captain of the much-delayed Boeing subdued a plane full of hot, bothered passengers by soothingly promising: "Ladies and gentlemen, for

your pleasure we're going to make the beach departure." Huh. I thought grumpily, the pilot just means that the wind direction obliges him to take off towards the sea.

Three minutes later the plane, and my opinion of Continental Airlines, changed course by 180 degrees. Suddenly we were gliding along at 2,000ft around the foot of the island, then following the beach every

A plane
Warning for intending transatlantic travellers who haven't yet booked for flights to the US before Easter: it could be too late. For the first three months of this year, airlines have been offering lower fares than ever before. As a result, flights between now and Tuesday (the last day of March) are fully booked even for those prepared to pay full fares. And once April begins, the pre-Easter rush means space is still at a premium. Flight specialists say that the only significant seats are on indirect routes (via France via Paris) or less reputable airlines, such as British Airways and Air India.

CHECK OUT

A train
Anglia Railways (01473 693469) is offering a "London Evening Out" ticket for two people travelling together, costing £12 from Ipswich and £18 from Norwich. You can travel south on the 4.05pm from Norwich or later, and return on one of the last two trains of the evening or on the first one the following morning. Book by 2pm the day before.

A boat
Britain's biggest holiday company, Thomson, should be undergoing flotation in May; in any event, it can send you floating around the Caribbean. The company (0990 502562) has taken an allocation on a Norwegian Cruise Line vessel, *Norwegian Sea*, and is offering a Jewels of the Caribbean cruise over the summer, beginning at Santo Domingo and calling in at St Lucia, Antigua, St Maarten, St Thomas and San Juan. Prices range from £859 to £1,505.

A drink
Think twice before taking duty-free booze on that cruise. The Thomson brochure warns that the vessel "prohibits passengers from bringing their own alcohol beverages aboard; any duty-free purchases will be held by the purser's office, and returned to guests at the end of their cruise".

A meal
"A genuine desert-island setting with the sand between your toes and *makuti* (palm-thatch) above your head. The traditional meal comprises marinated fish and coconut; fabulously tasting whole crabs steamed in ginger, followed by barbecue fish with Swahili sauce, accompanied by coconut rice, and chapatis". This review of the Wasini Island Restaurant, at the

far south of the Kenyan coast, is taken from *Essential Kenya*, out this week from AA Publishing. Other titles in the new series cover Prague, California and Bali & Lombok, each priced at £4.99.

A room
"In Sydney costs more from Wednesday, when accommodation tax rises to 7 per cent to cover the cost of the 2000 Olympics.

A week from now ...
... the new face of Butlin's "Family Entertainment Resorts" will be revealed. The former holiday camps at Bognor Regis, Minehead and Skegness are being refurbished, and are due to open at Easter 1999.

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In the swim: at the Lakeside
Aquarium you view the water
world from the inside out
Photograph: Jon Winter

A wonder called fish

For a watery insight into Windermere – fish, pond skaters and all – Sarah Collins and her two sons visited the Lakeside Aquarium in Cumbria. They talked to Jon Winter

There ought to be a sign saying "please do not tickle the trout" when you step into the Lakeside Aquarium in Cumbria. Entering as it may seem to dangle your digits in the fish-filled pool just inside the entrance, it'll always be the resident trout that have the last laugh when they greedily snatch your fingers.

Any trauma suffered through this first encounter with the aquatic life of the Lake District will dissolve with a quick geography lesson, explaining when and how the landscape of the lakes formed, before you arrive at the mountain top. This aquarium is most unlike the exotic sea life centres, complete with sharks and stingrays, that have been popping up around the country. Here, your journey springs to life among gills, becks and bogland, a saturated land of spongy sphagnum moss and emerging rivulets. With the sound of a trickling stream in your ears you can peer into this easily-overlooked

miniature water world, inhabited by the stickleback, minnow and common toad.

A little farther downstream, there are more hands-on exhibits, and an aquatic laboratory equipped with microscopes and magnifying glasses. Helpful staff are usually on hand to answer questions and help you marvel in close-up at the watery ways of the whirligig beetle and pond skater.

As gravity gains the upper hand, the streams and rivers running off the mountain top collect in deep scars that were cut into the landscape by retreating glaciers 10,000 years ago. Today we know these as the Lakes, and your journey first takes you to the centre-piece Windermere tank, before continuing back along the bed of the lake through a transparent tunnel.

Viewed inside out, the lake is fascinating, and it's here in the tunnel under the lake that you meet the stars of the show. At the surface they may look like plain old

ducks, but seen from below their skilled diving forays to the bottom of the 3-metre tank make a memorable sight.

"This year we want to get inside the tank with scuba gear and point out the different species to visitors in the tunnel using a waterproof pad and pen," explained a keeper. "We're also going to start hand-feeding him," he enthused, pointing to a 3-ft catfish waving gently in the flow.

"He's only young at the moment, but when he matures he should reach around 10ft – and, better still, the bigger he grows, the uglier he is going to get. He'll spend most of the time wallowing out of sight at the bottom when he does get quite big, so the plan is to wait until the tank is full of visitors and then lure him up to feed face to face with everyone."

Leaving the lake's still-waters, you rejoin the flow as it wanders on through lowland Cumbria to where river merges into

estuary and grey mullets, flounders and sea anemones appear in the tanks. It's here that you leave the tranquil, delicate world of the lakeland river as fresh water disappears out to sea. When I visited, one section was being refurbished to accommodate a pair of otters. No doubt the frolicking of these fury creatures will steal the limelight from the diving ducks when they arrive at Easter.

The visitors

Sandra Collins, from Humberside, took her two sons, Benjamin, 13, and Matthew, nine.

Sandra: We had a great time. I thought the boys would enjoy it more than me, but I surprised myself. There is quite a variety and I particularly liked the way that you follow the story of a river – and aren't the ducks great? If it stops raining we are going out with the field book to see what we can recognise down by the real lake.

Matthew: I thought the best bit was seeing Beo underwater in the tunnel when I was on the bridge.

If I was disappointed with anything, it was the video presentation. We thought it was going to be a nature documentary or something, but it seemed to be more about tourism in the Lake District. Also, the visit is maybe a bit expensive. Together with the field book we paid about £13, and it didn't even take an hour to go round.

Benjamin: I liked it. I have seen the big rays in that last tank before, at the Sealife Centre in Scarborough. But there weren't many big fish here, except for the catfish; he was good. I think my favourite was the iguana [an overseas visitor in the aquaquest lab]. The man let it out of its tank for a walk and we were watching it watch the fish through the glass.

Matthew: I thought the best bit was seeing Beo underwater in the tunnel when I was on the bridge.

The deal
Getting there: The Aquarium is located at Lakeside, near Newby Bridge at the southern tip of Windermere (015395 30153). By car it is a 25-minute drive along the A590 from junction 36 on the M6. The nearest station is Windermere, which has direct connections with Oxenholme, Preston and Wigan, all of which are on the main rail network. From Windermere you can take the steamer across the lake to Lakeside. **Opening times:** daily from 9am to 5pm (last entry 4pm).

Admission: adults £4.95, children £3.45, family ticket (two adults with up to three children) £15.50, children under four free of charge.

Facilities: full access for the disabled. A well stocked shop has all manner of watery souvenirs and toys. There is no cafe or toilet inside the Aquarium; visitors are directed towards a coffee shop and toilets nearby.



How to make tracks through a patch of tranquillity

Weekend walk:
Matthew Brace
explores a stretch
from Rosthwaite to
Stonethwaite that
provides the perfect
introduction to
Lakeland tramping

At the end of a twisting, swooping, Lakeland road past miles of conifer and beech woods, lies a promised land. Here in a natural amphitheatre on the floor of a once glaciated valley three streams meet and combine their strength into a frothing river. On all sides the russet brown fells rise up into the clouds.

This is Borrowdale, deep in the heart of the Lake District. It can be a mournful place when the skies are low but at the same time a haven of peace and

beauty. It is also the wettest place in Britain so bring your waterproofs.

I was always convinced Tolkein found Frodo the Hobbit here, but he didn't. That was Herefordshire and Worcestershire which seem far too tame in comparison. Still, that does not stop the walker familiar with the story imagining there are Hobbit holes tucked into the fell-sides.

This four-mile walk, the Stonethwaite Stroll for want of

a better title, is ideal as a small child's introduction to the delights of tramping the Lakes. It rambles on the flat between the villages of Rosthwaite and Stonethwaite, so start in either.

Parking in both has always been hellish. You may find you are forced up towards Seatoller hut if it's only a short walk back and an opportunity for another view or two.

If you choose Rosthwaite

walk back to the northern en-

trance to the village (the one you came through from Keswick). As you drove in you might have seen a small lane on your right. Find it again and take it and when it peters out follow on along a footpath.

The river running parallel on your right is the Derwent which frequently floods here and stops the traffic on the road. (Nature getting its own back.) It has already joined at this stage by Hawes Gill which tumbles down Hawes Pass (the big valley on your right) and just a few hundred yards down the valley the river is further swelled by the Langstrath Beck. Eventually the whole lot pours into the beautiful Derwent Water.

When you reach the bridge at Langthwaite don't be tempted to cross it, even if the Youth Hostel on the other side is welcoming and warm.

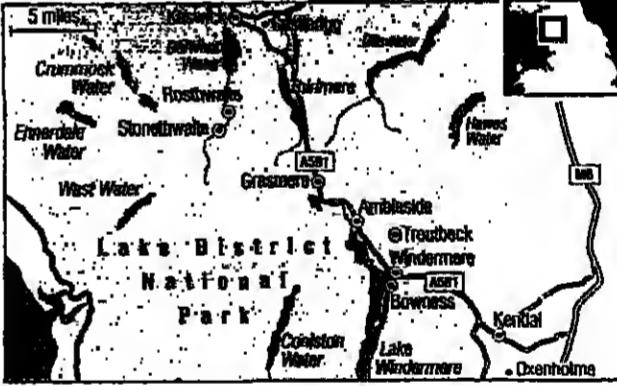
Instead, head down the lane ahead of you and on to the main road. Looking back down the valley you should get a good view of the tree-covered Castle Crag, one of the Lake District's smaller fells but a potentially treacherous climb. It is very steep in places and peppered with disused slate mines whose entrances gape from the ground. But from a safe distance it looks fine.

The road will bring you past a school playground and into Stonethwaite which is little more than a hamlet. Turn left just before a red phone box and cross Stonethwaite Beck on a small bridge. Turn right and head up towards the looming falls.

Ahead of you is the valley of Greenup Gill which leads to the summit of Ullock (2,370m). To the right of this is the Langstrath Valley, or the "valley with no end" as some walkers call it. Our big treks to the high peaks it does seem an awfully long trudge.

Between the two is a fat haunch of rock known as Eagle Crag. There were once golden eagles here, apparently, but now most have retreated to even more remote areas, up in the Scottish Highlands.

There is another footbridge



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Lines are open 9am-5pm, 7 days a week.

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Renaissance revisited at the touch of a button

Before travelling thousands of miles to see the works of a favourite artist, check the Internet, advises Matthew Hoffman. Lorenzo Lotto may never have intended his paintings to appear on screen – but now the modern art lover is well prepared to see the real thing

Do you, like me, find yourself reading reviews of exhibitions in New York, Milan and Paris that will never come to London? Up to now, the only remedy open to those of us who could not find the time, or money, to travel to distant cities in pursuit of fleeting assemblies of works by a favourite painter or movement has been to buy the catalogue – if even that could be found, in English and affordable. The other day, however, I happened upon an imaginative development that offers some solace to the stay-at-home art lover: the virtual tour.

I had been planning a trip to Washington DC, to be taken some time this spring, for reasons unconnected with art; but having read of an exhibition of the Italian Renaissance paintings of Lorenzo Lotto that had opened at the National Gallery there, I thought I would try to catch the show as well. But when would it close? And just which works would they be exhibiting?

Lotto was a recently acquired interest of mine. In the autumn of 1996, in the Correr Museum in Venice, I had come upon a small picture by Lotto of the Virgin enthroned, a little crown held over her head by two hovering angels. And although there were many more famous paintings in the Correr, something about the little Lotto captivated me. So I kept an eye out after that for other works by him.

I kept an eye out after that for other works by him. One, in London's National Gallery, showed me that he could paint portraits with exquisite detail, and an altarpiece dedicated to Saint Antonine in the Church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, of two monks handing out alms to and receiving petitions from a highly realistic multitude, confirmed that he could work on a large scale as well. Then, last year, a book came out — *Lorenzo Lotto*, by Peter Humfrey, about the artist's life and works that helped feed my curiosity — and whet my appetite to see more of the paintings themselves.

What to do, then, about Washington? I turned



'A Lady with a Drawing of Lucretia' by Lorenzo Lotto, left. Above, as it appears on the Internet site
Photograph: The Bridgeman Art Library

The scale, for one, is important; you get no idea just what size the pictures are from reproductions on paper or screen, even when the measurements are given. Then there is the paint quality: the real works don't glow from behind as they do on a video screen, nor do they have the concentrated intensity of reduced versions on coated paper. To be frank, they are a little dull in comparison; but immeasurably more affecting, for all that.

- My virtual tour did yield one unexpected benefit. As I approached the National Gallery, great billboard signs outside proclaimed "LOTTO", a bit as they do in New York City, where you are being hidden to play the local lottery. Inside, the hype continued: the show was subtitled "Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance" and you were told immediately and repeatedly that this great painter has been obscured by the popular acclaim accorded to Titian. In fact, Lotto is a very touching minor painter, at least by comparison with Titian, and his work is noted in every decent guide to the art of Venice.

noted in every decent guide to the art of Venice. Judging by a couple of conversations I had in Washington with others who had seen the Lotto show, they had been disappointed. But as anyone who had previously taken the Internet tour knew what to expect, presumably, like me, they were neither surprised nor disappointed to have failed to encounter the grandeur, sensuousness and cultural sophistication of another Titian. Lotto's works provide different satisfactions, not the less welcome for being in a lower register. The hype may mislead, but the virtual tour gives a truer impression of what's to be found on the walls of the gallery.

The Lotto virtual tour continues at www.nga.gov/exhibitions/lotwel.htm. The real thing can be seen at the Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo, 2 April-28 June; and the Grand Palais, Paris, 12 October-11 January 1999.

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When Welkin went on holiday

There were strange happenings down in the farmyard, as Duff Hart-Davis observed, when a visiting donkey met a trio of camelids

Welkin has a large and (for a donkey) very handsome head, but I fear that not much of it is occupied by brains. His behaviour may be marginally less idiotic than it was when we first knew him five years ago, but he still has a phenomenal capacity for making an ass of himself.

We bought him from a shady dealer near Swindon when he was two years old, and found that he was exceedingly nervous, as if he had been knocked about. We did what we could to build up his confidence, and then sold him to a friend who wanted a companion for her own jenny, Hannah. She – the new owner – lavished such affection on Welkin that he became much calmer.

Now the pair of donkeys visit us for regular holidays, often staying for

inhabited by furry monsters, he went ballistic.

If you are a donkey, and feel the need to demonstrate outrage, you have to make certain preparations. One is to stick your tail straight out behind you in a horizontal bar; another is to flick your ears back and forward like range-finders; another is to raise your nose high in the air, roll back your upper lip and start braying as though the world is about to end.

Welkin went through this routine in a couple of seconds. As he wound himself up, I could see him thinking, "What in the name of creation are these?" Then, suitably adjusted, and roaring like a demon, he launched a charge at the intruders.

Never mind that, with his head

pulled up with flanks heaving and a bemused expression on his face, while the alpacas took stock of the situation from the safety of an overgrown hedge.

Thereafter his charges became increasingly half-heated; everybody gradually settled down, and now the two species take each other for granted.

After four months in residence, the alpacas themselves have adapted well to life in the Cotswolds. They have overcome their phobia about chickens, which they thought exceedingly dangerous when they arrived, and they have grown tremendous fleeces, so long that their wool undulates in the wind.

Abednego – he of the black cap and white-tipped ears – is the tamest, and will take food from your hand; but all three remain cautious about approaching human beings, and stick close together, especially if worried. When the bunt came past the other day, and hounds gave tongue in the wood on the escarpment, the three alpacas formed up in characteristic defensive formation, facing outwards in a little star, backsides together.

The man who sold them to us claimed that they make good anti-fox guards. At the time I thought he was pulling a fast one – but now I believe he was right. One afternoon towards dusk my wife saw the alpacas deliberately harassing a fox which had emerged from the wood on its evening round: they chased it down the field to the point where the footpath goes over a stile – and it was just the fox's bad luck that it then met a man walking his dog in the opposite direction.

Certainly we have lost no chickens to foxes since the alpacas joined up – and now their vigilance has become all the more important, as we have just taken delivery of a Brahma cockerel and three hens. These birds, being heavily built and rather statuesque, would be sitting targets for Reynard if some other species were not keeping a lookout on their behalf. Welkin, we know, doesn't give a damn for foxes – so it is up to our biblical trio to act as early-warning radar.

Camelids are extremely agile. Sideways jumps are part of their daily repertoire, and they can turn on a fivepenny piece. When Welkin bore down on them, all three took a sudden jink to their right, which left him motoring hard into the distance, pulling two or three g in a right-handed turn. Having at last screeched to a halt, he adjusted his sights and put in another rush, still bellowing, only to hit empty space once again.

Half a dozen repetitions brought him, if not to his senses, at least to a state of temporary exhaustion. He



Donkey daze: Welkin on vacation

Photograph: John Lawrence

What, when, where ...

Check the state of the surf before you head for the mile-long beach at Praa Sands, between Penzance and Helston, this weekend, to watch round one of the Sunair Wave Rebel body-boarding grand prix. This is the start of the Cornish world water sports festival, running from March to October, which includes pilot gig racing, surf life-saving and the Cutty Sark tall ships race. One of the festival sponsors is the St Austell brewery, so you can enjoy a glass of Timers or Wreckers while you admire the rippling muscles.

Festival hot line: 0891 22 1998, Salo/Wave: 01637 871153, Surfcall: 0839380 360



Sally Kindberg

NATURE NOTE

Every night now, the eel-fishers are out on the banks of the Severn, dipping their nets in the hope that they will come up filled with gold. It seems barely credible that the baby eels – tiny, translucent and only a couple of inches long – have drifted all the way from the Sargasso Sea, off the Gulf of Mexico. Still more extraordinary is the fact that such primitive creatures have some power of navigation.

Even the most experienced fishermen do not really understand the movements of the eels once they enter the river. They drift upstream on high tides, and then, as the ebb sets in, they seem to make for the banks, heading for flows of fresh water. On some nights they mass into solid snakes, miles long, and if a fisherman hits one of those, his fortune is made: he has only to put his net in the water to load it.

In the old days – until the Sixties – eels were a spring treat for country people. For a few weeks, in every cottage, they became staple fare, and hogs sold any surplus for sixpence a pound. Now, such is the demand from Europe and Japan that the price has rocketed to £10 a kilo – four times that of smoked salmon – and locals can no longer afford the delicacy.

Duff Hart-Davis

A date with a hedge

A bit of hawthorn, a dash of ash: what does it mean? Matthew Brace plays rural detective in Oxfordshire as he digs up the history of a local hedgerow

It looked like any ordinary hedge, but Peigi Wallace knew it was something special. She stared at it for some time before sticking her head between two bushes for a closer examination.

"Aha, it's a double hedge, very interesting," came her muffled voice from the undergrowth.

Reluctantly I joined her, thrusting my head past the thorns and brambles. The winter had eaten away a lot of foliage and left two distinct parallel lines of tangled, brown sticks about 4ft apart, leading north.

"This gives us a vital clue," Dr Wallace said, with a sparkle in her eye. I was still none the wiser.

We were hedge-dating, playing rural detectives to trace the history of this south-western corner of Oxfordshire. This spring you are likely to see a lot more people with their heads stuck in hedges looking for clues.

Since the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) launched a campaign last year to save hedgerows, in response to widespread destruction, hundreds of volunteers have been out-scrambling along field boundaries investigating hedges in order to build up a historical map of the English countryside. Over the winter, trees and bushes are harder to identify because of the lack of leaves and flowers, but with spring upon us local CPRE groups are expecting lots more volunteers.

Hedgerows have become a highly contentious issue in recent years. According to the CPRE, they are being deliberately removed to the order of 3,600km (more than 2,200 miles) every year, and even more are being damaged by neglect. About a third of the hedges in England and Wales are estimated to have been removed in the decade between 1984 and 1994.

Hedgerows are important for a number of reasons. Aesthetically, they are picturesque and historic characteristics of the English countryside which add to our enjoyment of views. Practically, they mark the boundaries between parishes and estates. And

ecologically, they are havens for wildlife. Hedgerows provide wildife corridors along which small mammals can forage, protected from aerial predators by thick brambles and branches. Small birds use the same protection of the hedgerows to build their nests. Take away the hedge, and the diversity of species is bound to suffer.

Under the Hedgerow Regulations brought in last summer, anyone who wants to remove a hedge must get permission from the local planning authority, and hedgerows deemed "important" will be protected. Anyone flouting the law could be fined £5,000. The CPRE was critical of the laws, fearing they would save fewer than one in five hedgerows, but was relieved at the Government's proposed increase in protection.

Their cause is helped considerably by the information collected by hedge-daters, which is passed to local authorities to ensure that as many hedgerows as possible are saved. Thanks to Dr Wallace, hedge-co-ordinator of the CPRE's Oxfordshire branch, the county is ahead of the game, with roughly a quarter of its hedges already surveyed.

"I think the tide has turned here. We are certainly not losing any more hedgerows here in Oxfordshire, but we are only getting a few new ones built," she said. "That's why we have to keep dating. If we lost our hedgerows, it would not be the English countryside any more."

She had picked for me a hedge near the small town of Grove in the Vale of the White Horse, unknown even to her, so I would have to start from scratch. "Have you ever dated a hedge before?" Dr Wallace asked. I had heard of Hooper's rule. Max Hooper, who worked with the Nature Conservancy in the Sixties, discovered that you could estimate a hedge's age by counting the number of species in a 30-metre stretch: one species, he reckoned, equals 100 years. "That's not

enough. That's just a starting-point. There are days of research after you have done that," said Dr Wallace.

My hedge contained hawthorn, elder, sycamore, ash and hazel, and it had clearly been planted as a double hedge. Hooper might have left it at that, estimating it to be a hedge from the 15th century, and moved on to the next one, but I had been bitten by the hedge-dating bug and wanted to know more. I was tempted to drop in at the National Monuments Record in Swindon, to view their unique collection of aerial reconnaissance photographs taken by the RAF and the US Air Force during the war. They show every field, road, barn and, crucially, every hedge. If I'd had the time and money I could also have taken a trip to Maryland in the US, to view sets of photographs taken by the German Luftwaffe which were claimed by American troops at the fall of Berlin.

But these records would take me back only 50 years. I needed to go back much further into the past, so instead I paid a visit to the Royal Geographical Society's map room in west London and got my hands on an original 1875 coar of the area.

There, along the route, Dr Wallace and I had walked, was marked a Green Lane, an abandoned track just wide enough for a horse and cart. It even had a name, Windsor Lane. I had at least partly solved our mystery.

Of course, the dedicated hedge-dater could add to this, consulting tithe and enclosure maps and early Ordnance Surveys to find out where the lane led, when it was planted and who might have used it. The lane's straightness could suggest Roman influence, and it is close enough to the Marlborough Downs to have been, possibly, a more recent branch of the Ridgeway.

One thing was for sure. Peigi and I had discovered that it was important enough to have been named and given status on a map. That, the CPRE would argue, is ample evidence that this hedge is also important enough to save today.

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Fourth amendment

Road test: VW Golf Mk4 by John Simister

Volkswagen started making it last August. Now, at last, you can buy one in Britain. As with the Passat, the delays with the new Golf have been interminable and hard to justify. So is the fourth amendment worth the wait?

It was always going to be an intriguing car. Like the Beetle before it, the Volkswagen Golf is a car whose place in both car culture and wider society transcends the marketing intentions of its creators. There are Golf clubs, Golf magazines, Golf specialists. No rival car has such a strong identity.

The first Golf was made for nine years (a version of it is still built in South Africa). The second had a similar production life, but the third, visually flabby after the confident cut of the first two, was made for just six years. The styling on the fourth is crisp and sharp – almost a caricature of what makes a Golf look like a Golf. Its VW badges are bigger than any Beastie Boys fan ever plundered. The rear side pillar is as thick as ever, but now framed into a styling feature by a bold pair of zig-zag cut-lines, and big, round wheel-arches filled by uncommonly large wheels.

Inside, the familiar meets the new. There's none of the claustrophobic coal-holiness of the Golf Mk2. Nor does the dashboard bulge in front of you as it did in the Mk3, but the surface textures and feeling of solid quality are as comfortably of rivals' efforts as ever. This time, we have

soft-feel finishes on many normally hard plastic mouldings, cloth trim where others are vinyl-clad (the windscreen pillars, for example), and a low-set dashboard whose top extends far forward to the base of a laid-back windscreen. The waistline is low, too, all making for a light, airy cabin.

Nest touches abound. There are pop-out pairs of cup-holders front and rear, and a rear ashtray closed off by a pair of quarter-cylindrical covers which clamp together clamp fashion, and the instruments are backlit in eerie blue by night. The firm front seats are height-adjustable by means of a pump-action ratcheting lever; the steering wheel can be adjusted in and out as well as up and down, and – thank goodness – the stereo system is Volkswagen's own, not the fiddly Sony set inflicted on UK Volkswagen buyers.

A passenger airbag is standard; side airbags are optional. The brakes have both anti-lock system and automatic electronic regulation of the braking effort required by each wheel, and the rear seats incorporate the Isofix system for attaching a child seat. If fate has lined you up for a crash, the Golf is a good car to it in.

Engines range from a 1.4-litre unit to a 2.3-litre motor, with five cylinders arranged in a V. In between come two 1.8-litre, 20-valve engines (one for the GTI and a turbocharged version for the GTI Plus), a pair of TDI turbo-diesels, and

a 100bhp 1.6, as fitted to the well-equipped Golf SE you see here. Nowadays it has a variable-resonance inlet system, improving its pulling power at low speeds, and is mainly made of weight-saving aluminium.

Not exactly a state-of-the-art engine, it pulls the Golf along sufficiently briskly to stave off a craving for more muscle power. It can get a little raucous if you work it hard, but most of the time it's sweet enough. The clutch bites annoyingly far up the pedal's arc of movement, though.

The standard tyre size, even for this up-range SE, is an unfashionably podgy 175/80 R14. These balloon-like tyres give a supple ride over sharp bumps – no Golf has travelled more smoothly – but squeal embarrassingly easily if you take a corner with gusto. Keen drivers will prefer the optional alloy wheels with 195/65 R15 tyres. Either way, the Golf feels safe and solidly planted on a twisty road, but seldom stodgy. French rivals string beads together more fluidly, though, and are more fun to drive.

But none of them is as well made or finished, or has as strong a personality. A Golf has always seemed like a family friend, and the new one is as faithful as ever. And to back up the faith, you get a three-year warranty and the galvanised body has a 12-year guarantee against disintegration. Just what you need for a long-term relationship.

Specifications

Price: £14,820. Engine: 1,595cc, 4 cylinders, 8 valves, 100bhp at 5,600rpm. Five-speed gearbox, front-wheel drive. Top speed: 117mph, 0-60 in 10.9sec, 32.37mpg.

Rivals

Audi A3 1.6: £14,825. Three-door body, prestigious badge, but underneath it's almost identical to the Golf, and inside it's more sparsely equipped.

Citroën Xsara 1.6 SX: £13,720.

Cheaper than Golf and more fun through corners, but slower and not nearly as pleasing to look at or sit in.

FIAT Brava 1.6 ELX: £13,748. Eye-catching, lively, well equipped, but lumpy over bumps. Thick pillars and narrow rear window impede the view out.

Peugeot 306 1.6 GLX: £14,145. Supple over bumps, sharp through bends.

Uncommonly good-looking, but not particularly quick, and feels cheap inside.

Renault Mégane 1.6 RXE: £13,965.

Interior is full of hard plastics, but oval-themed Renault looks intriguing, is comfortable and fun to drive.



GAVIN GREEN

There were grander, faster, and certainly more desirable cars. But, among all the status-enhancers at the recent Geneva Show, one new car stood out for its sheer good sense: the Skoda Octavia estate. Skodas have come a long way since the days when John Le Carré was in vogue, and when the only thing high-tech about Eastern Europe was its ability to dope its athletes (and not get caught). Skoda cars were ugly, sad, sluggish, smelly little things.

They were so bad, Skoda undoubtedly did its bit – unwittingly – to bring down Communism. Skodas, along with Russian food queues, Bulgarian plastic shoes and Polish architects, all played their part. After all, what self-respecting Czech could honestly say their system was working, when that's all they had to drive around in?

But while most old Eastern European car makers disappeared when capitalism invaded, Skoda has prospered. It was bought by Volkswagen, which knows a thing or two about making cars – and also a thing or two about turning basket cases into winners, following social upheaval (look what happened to the Beetle after the Second World War).

Nowadays, Skoda builds Volkswagen-engineered and Volkswagen-designed cars, with just enough Czech content to keep the locals happy. And, because Skoda still has about as much kudos on this side of Europe as Russian *haute couture*, the cars are still cheap. Is it any surprise that, when people stop trying to keep ahead of the Joneses and buy a Skoda, they are invariably delighted? Skoda have the highest repeat purchase rate of any make of car in the UK: 82 per cent.

The newer the Skoda, the better. The Felicia, the only model sold at the moment in the UK, is made in VW standards, but it still started life as an old-school Skoda. Not even the face-lift that the Geneva Show previewed can disguise its origins.

The Octavia is an altogether better thing. Take away the badge, and it's a Volkswagen. But whereas the Passat, which it resembles in shape and size, starts at almost £15,000, the Octavia will probably sell from £11,000 when UK sales start this June. The estate version shown at Geneva – similar to the fabulous Passat estate – will start at about £12,000 (four grand less than the base Passat, nr, for that matter, just under £4,000 less than the cheapest Mondeo estate). It is brilliant value for money, and will be quite the best buy in the family car class.

Unlike the Felicia, it also looks good. Big, chunky and stylish too, in a utilitarian sort of way (rather like a motorised Doc Martens shoe). I drove an Octavia saloon – a 1.9 turbo-diesel model – in the UK recently, and it felt as if I was driving one of the latest generation Volkswagen models (which, of course, is precisely what it is). The estate looks even better, as well as being even more practical.

Skoda is an important part of Volkswagen's grand plan to rule the automotive world. VW boss Ferdinand Piech – grandson of the Beetle founder Ferdinand Porsche – has clear goals for his four car brands, VW, Audi, Skoda and Seat. He wants Volkswagen to rival Mercedes for quality, Audi to take on BMW (mission accomplished, I'd say), Seat to rival Alfa Romeo for sportiness and style (some way to go) and – believe it or not – Skoda to usurp Volvo as the thinking person's choice for solid, safe transport. Volvo is helping Piech by slowly deserting its core market, as it (probably misguidedly) chases BMW in the stylish/ performance/sports saloon sector. Skoda aims to fill the void.

If recent products are anything to go by, it will almost certainly succeed. Skoda is on a roll. Sales are booming (production was 357,000 last year compared with 170,000 in 1991) as quality improves and as the old Crap Commie stigma evaporates.

In Britain, the Octavia will be the turning-point in Skoda's fortunes. It is bound to be a huge success. After it hits the streets, the only people feeling uncomfortable about Skoda jokes will be those telling them.

Volkswagen's original pocket rocket

Radical, or what?

James Ruppert on the success story of the Nineties

of character and sportiness of the later version."

It is worth looking at the Mark 3 to see how it has weathered in the used car market, and whether there are any bargains out there.

Arguably the best model Volkswagen built – which will not be built as a mark 4 – is the VR6. It has been described as a miniature Mercedes, which is not far off the mark. At the Vulcan Motor Company in Norwich, a very nice, 1992, 80,000 miles example had had one previous owner, a doctor. It came with air-conditioning, was in stunning condition and drove beautifully. The price was almost £11,000.

A privately owned five-door GTI was a reasonably £6,000. That was because it had covered just over 100,000 miles, according to all the records and the digital odometer. The last

GTI was a shadow of its former self, but a magazine such as *Golf Xtreme* would have the information to turn it into something much more fun to drive. However, Golfs do't all run VR6, or GTI engines. They can be dull, worthy plodders with a diesel unit on board which is likely to last well into the next century. A small trader had a turbodiesel 1994 model, which had led a busy life with one previous, caring owner. It was advertised at £7,700 and had covered 90,000 miles. The engine isn't that bad once you get used to it.

So why wait for a Mark 4 Golf? If you really want one, wait until 2006. A 1998 example will be nicely run in by then.

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My worst car: Adrian Goldberg's Renault 25



I came to driving quite late. I was 28 years old; I had just passed my test and inherited a Mini from an ex-girlfriend. Somehow it didn't fit my image. People sneered at the little thing so I had to get something a bit bigger and, to be blunt, a bit more phallic. I spotted the answer to my dreams hidden in a load of other used cars on a lot in Dudley. You couldn't miss it: my worst car was a great big red Renault 25.

The fact that this Renault was so difficult to get at and the fact that it did not start should have tipped me off. Despite the fact that the dealer had to jump start it, and the gears only engaged when the clutch pedal was nearly out, I fell in love with it. I reckoned it was time to spend money on a serious car, and for me £3,000 was serious.

For that I got a comfortable, but troublesome car. That was unfortunate because at the time I was commuting to Manchester. The scariest moment was when the clutch pedal snapped, in the outside lane of the M6. I applied every brake I could find and finally managed to screech to a halt. Luckily some truckers saw I was in trouble and stopped to push me on to the hard shoulder.

Not only could the car be lethal, it could also be costly. When I did some calculations I realised that over six months that Renault was probably doing no more than eight miles to the gallon. I reckoned I could have run a Rolls-Royce for less. Then there were the Renault garages who weren't interested in fixing the car because it wasn't that new. On

one occasion I did find one dealer to wave a spanner in the direction of my sick Renault, but that may have been so that they could charge me £600 for the privilege.

I had to get rid of that car, and in the end I drove it to a breaker's yard. The bloke in there reckoned he might get something for the headlamps. He paid me £40. I was ecstatic. I actually danced with joy.

Running that Renault taught me two important lessons: never buy a car without getting it checked by a professional, and never buy a Renault.

Adrian Goldberg presents 'Move It!' on BBC Radio 5 Live on Saturday mornings at 11.05am. He was talking to James Ruppert.

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Beds of honour

Weekend work: Anna Pavord takes action in the garden

- Plant onions, but not before you have spent some virtuous hours in making a comfortable bed for them. An onion set is not man enough to heave great clods of earth on its shoulders. Knock back any lumps of soil with the back of a rake, then rake over the surface and plant the sets roughly 6in apart. The rows should be about 12in apart. You do not necessarily have to include onions in the normal rotation of vegetable crops. They can be grown in the same place for several years.
- Sow annuals such as lobelia and snapdragon. Use a pot for this initial sowing, rather than a seed tray. Gently firm down the compost in the pot and scatter the seed as thinly and evenly as you can over the surface. Water it in using a



TOOLSHED

Raising plants from seed is an enduring pleasure. Not only is the metamorphosis of dry kernel into slender green shoot endlessly miraculous to witness, but it also requires deliciously little input from the gardener. The outcome, however, can be improved by heeding the basics.

First, a plea to any thrifty souls who carefully hoard elderly, half-used seed packs. Don't bother. Even the most resilient seeds lose their viability quite rapidly, especially if exposed to air, moisture or fluctuating temperatures. Seeds are relatively cheap, so buy only what you are likely to use in a couple of seasons. Throw out anything older than this, and treat yourself to a fresh packet.

Compost should also be fresh, as even stored in the bag it slowly deteriorates. Never be tempted to reuse old compost for seeds. It will be unpredictable in pH and fertiliser content and may well harbour diseases. Concern for peat resources has seen more and more peat-free mixtures appear in garden centres. I have used the same bark-based multi-purpose (I have never found a need for specific "seed" composts) for several years with excellent results. The only thing I regularly add to this mix is a top dressing of fine vermiculite, a naturally occurring mineral which is light and free-

www.english-test.net

draining but also heat- and moisture-retentive, and thus provides ideal conditions for germination.

What to sow into? A standard seed tray measuring around 35cm by 20cm is useful for many things (such

20cm is useful for many things (such as chitting potatoes) but it is too large for sowing, unless you happen to have a field you need to fill with bedding plants. Far more practical is the quarter-tray, which is plenty big enough to germinate hundreds of smaller seeds or a decent number of much larger ones. I find the most versatile container of all is a simple 7.5cm plastic pot. Go for square rather than round, as they will pack more tightly together. Keen recyclers will no doubt conscript old yoghurt pots and the like, but, environmental issues notwithstanding, I would not recommend them. Purpose-made pots are carefully designed for optimum drainage and stability, and if you spend a little more on good thick plastic they will last for years.

There are lots of other options for sowing: compressed peat pots, expandable peat pellets, fibre grow-pots, home-made paper pots and so on. I don't bother with any of them, and suggest you don't either. All are biodegradable, the idea being to plant them out together with their contents. This, it is claimed, reduces root disturbance and helps the plant to grow away more quickly. My experience is that they can hinder

I do, however, use modular trays. These have long been the norm in commercial horticulture and are now finding favour among home gardeners too. Basically they are plastic trays divided into a number of separate cells, rather like a honeycomb. Seeds are sown direct into each cell, either singly or severally (and later thinned). This means space for unfettered growth and no pricking out of overcrowded seedlings, which saves on both time and (genuinely) root disturbance. Either buy them as one-piece plug trays or as plastic inserts which are then dropped into a seed tray. The cells come in a range of sizes and though you should be guided by the size of seed, it is worth remembering that the smaller sizes hold a minute amount of compost, and to develop well the seedlings require careful feeding, watering and prompt planting out. Propapacks are a polystyrene variation on this theme, and I find them especially worthwhile early in the season as they give extra insulation to the young roots. Whatever you sow into, make sure you retain heat and moisture by keeping a cover on the seeds until they begin germinate.

Tom Barber

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Full of the joys of early spring

Hyacinths, primroses, tulips... the garden is awash with great splurges of flowers, and now's the time to plan ahead for more. Anna Pavord gets trowelling

I do not see why we should not enjoy a mild winter and an early spring from time to time without supposing that the end of the world is nigh. It may yet all end in tears, with a hideous April, but March has been good in our garden. Bulbs have been flowering with reckless abandon - deep magenta *Tulipa pulchella*, almost smothered by spotty lungwort, and bright yellow *T. greigii*, with the backs of their petals washed over with a complicated bronzy green. There are ivyacints everywhere.

There are hyacinths everywhere.
Each year, when the bowls of forced hyacinths have finished in the house, I plant them out, more because it seems murderous to throw living things away than because I expect much from them. But this spring there have been 40 or 50 in bloom in the garden, growing even better than they do in bowls. In the house, I grow the bulbs in compost rather than fibre, and fancy (though I have no proof) that the sustenance they get from the compost makes it easier for them to pick up their socks in subsequent seasons. They have to expend a lot of their own capital if they are grown in fibre.

One group of blue and white hyacinths is clustered round a variegated brunnera (creamy leaves, forget-me-not flowers), the whole ensemble looking ridiculously like a piece of willow pattern china. Dark blue hyacinths grow amongst the low, pale, ferny foliage of sweet cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*) with clumps of a white Barnhaven primula, one of the few varieties that I got round to splitting last year. In another group, the colours are reversed, with white hyacinths, a stray bit of *Euphorbia robbiae* which absent-mindedly wandered off from the place in which it was put, and dark, almost navy blue cowichan primulas, also grown from Barnhaven seed.

I could get very interested in primroses, but I'm trying not to. Since I am already besotted with tulips and have more than a passing interest in aquilegias, our garden is in danger of screeching to a sudden, awful halt at the end of June. If I'm to fall in love, it must be with something that peaks in August or September. Sunflowers? Fun, but not complicated enough. Salvias? Too complicated by half. Penstemons? Yawn, yawn. Well, there are always pears. Pears are riveting.

Over the years, the primroses cross with each other, and drift into muddy mauves, but originally I had a mixture called 'Butterscotch' - copper, bronze, apricot and yellow - another mixture called 'Valentine Victorians' - rich, crimson pinks - and one called 'Rustic Reds' in the colours of tawny wallflowers.

Now is the time to be sowing more to flower next spring. They like cool conditions, so the seed is best sown thinly on the surface of compost in a 5-in pot, covered with a pane of glass and then left outside in a north-facing position. Primula seed dawdles towards germination, so it may be six weeks before you know whether you are to be a proud parent.

When happy, the primulas seed round with abandon. Out on what we unimaginatively call The Bank, a semicircular sweep of sloping ground around the south and west of the

house. Barnhaven 'Muted Victorians' and 'Striped Victorians' are flowering fit to bust, in weird shades of dirty pink and blue. The paths up the bank are dressed each year with crushed bark. This is evidently an ideal medium for self-seeding as there are far more seedlings here, where there is no competition, than ever appear on the bank itself. It slightly defeats the purpose of the path, of course, to have it covered with plants, but it seems churlish not to acknowledge the bounty. I dig up seedlings in trowelfuls - polyanthus, double daisies, verbascums, foxgloves, verbena, lychnis, polemonium - and press them on anyone who calls. The milkman scarcely dares come any more, but it keeps the path more or less open to traffic.

'Cantata', my tulips of the year two seasons ago, were planted out when they had finished their spectacular display, close to a young plant of *Euphorbia characias wulfenii*. The euphorbia has now reached its zenith, but unfortunately the tulips have dwindled. I like the brilliant red of the tulip with the acid green of the spurge. The equally bright *T. eichleri* has more staying power and has good foliage of a very pale, glaucous grey. Next autumn, I'm going to plant masses more of them close to the spurges.

The big spurges, such as *Euphorbia characias*, usually peak in late spring but have brought forward their act this year and are flowering with the purple-pink magnolia 'Leonard Messel'. They have blue brunnera as a companion. The spurges self-seed, too, and there is an extraordinary measure of variation in the seedlings' foliage and flowers. The ones I like most have bluish leaves and very bright lime flowers, without the dark eye.

Unfortunately, they hate being moved and they sulk for ages if you try. I find it best to cut down most of the tall stems and wait for new growth to sprout from the bottom. But generally, this is a good time to shift herbaceous perennials, before there is too much top growth to get damaged in the move. The difficulty lies in remembering what you said last summer you were going to do this spring. I was going to shift some daylilies last June from

going to shift some day-lilies, but have forgotten where I thought they ought to go. Resolution: take better notes.

The most evil sight in the garden is the narcissus 'Texas', with yellow petals and harsh orange trumpets, underneath the last pink blossoms of the viburnum 'Dawn'. For a long time, when the children wanted flowers to take to school in spring, 'Texas' was the sacrificial victim, which solved two problems at once. Having survived these onslaughts, the flowers now leek horribly every time I look out of the bedroom window. Perhaps the milkman may be

Old-fashioned Barnhaven primroses are available from Sonia Wright Plants, Westfield Farmhouse, West Street, Aldbourne, Wiltshire SN8 2BS (01672 540995). The nursery is open from 10am to dusk, Monday to Saturday, all year round.



Spring rush: when bowls of forced hyacinths such as 'Pink Earl' have finished flowering, plant the bulbs outdoors.

Photograph: John Glover/GPL

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Tropical triumphs: Martin Gibbons and palms

Photograph: Rui Xavier

A little bit of Africa in Richmond

The stuff of ... greenery. Sally Staples goes for palms

seedling to £1.700 for a 40-year-old, 20-ft-high

Argentinian palm.

Martin, who trained as a furniture designer, became interested in palms when his brother gave him one as a present and he watered it to death. He began to travel in the East and, armed with volumes of information, opened his first shop in 1989 in Sheen, Surrey, on his return to England.

Demand for his exotic trees soon grew, and Martin soon had to seek more space. Many specialists buy from him, and he exports to Ireland, France and even Spain, where the same palms are more expensive. "Some people walk in for 10 minutes to browse, and spend £5,000. Others will be here for much longer, and walk away absolutely thrilled with a £5 seedling," he says.

Mediterranean fan palms are popular, ranging from seedlings to trees 10ft tall. A 20-ft Sabal palmetto palm, the state tree of Florida, has a £95 price tag; there are yuccas and tree ferns from as little as £20.

Martin has an avenue of Chusan palms from China - a breed brought over to England in 1840 which were among the first specimens to be kept in the palm house at Kew. They have large, fan-shaped leaves sprouting from a spectacular hairy trunk, and will grow as much as 12in a year if provided with plenty of food and water.

"They are very hardy and can take frost and temperatures of -15°C in their stride," he says. "But wind is their major enemy. People associate palm trees with deserts and relentless sun,

or steamy tropical weather, but many grow in China and the Andes where the weather is far from tropical."

Inside the huge hothouse there is a great variety, including the bird of paradise palm from South Africa, the pygmy date palm, Japanese and Korean palms, and plants from Cuba and east Asia.

In 1991 Martin set up the European Palm Society, which now has nearly 1,000 members, and became director of the International Palm Society. His book, *The Palm Identifier* (Applause Press, £5.99 + £1.20 p&p), has sold more than 60,000 copies.

The Palm Centre, Ham Central Nursery, Ham Street, Ham, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7HA (0181-255-6191). Open daily, 10am-6pm. A mail-order catalogue is available, price £1.95.

GAMES

GOATS AND CARS REVISITED

WILLIAM HARTSTON

Last week's piece about goats, cars and the laws of probability has attracted a considerable postbag. The paradox began by putting you in the position of a game show contestant who has to pick one of three doors. All you know is that one of the doors has this week's star prize of a car behind it; the other two offer only a mangy goat. When you have picked one door, the host (who knows which door conceals the star prize) opens one of the doors you did not choose and shows a goat behind it. He then offers to let you change your mind. Most people then stick to their original choice. In fact, as explained last week, you will double your winning chance if you change your mind.

Antonio Carvalho writes from Henley on Thames: "Let's freeze the game show at the point when the host asks the contestant if he would like to change his mind. To avoid clutter, let's remove the door already shown to have a goat behind it. As far as the contestant is concerned, the circumstances remain

unchanged, ie the door initially chosen by him has only one-third of a chance of having the star prize behind it. Now let's bring in a passer-by from the street, show him the remaining two doors, and give him a go at the star prize. The odds for the passer-by cannot be 50-50! But this is impossible, because the odds must be the same for the passer-by and the initial contestant. Unless probability is a subjective concept, in which case a whole chapter of maths goes down the plughole. Can you help? I'd like to get some sleep!"

That, I think, sums up the

psychological aspect of the paradox rather better than I did last week. Ian Bellamy identifies the paradox as one cited by Frederick Mosteller of Harvard 30 years ago. Mosteller's explanation, he says, is to draw up a table of probabilities of the various possible outcomes when the contestant picks door A from three doors A, B and C. Four things can then happen:

1: A and B are goats; host opens C;
2: A and C are goats; host opens B;
3: B and C are goats; host opens C;
4: B and C are goats; host opens B.

Since the probability that the prize is behind any particular door is one in three, the probability of 1 and 2 are each one in three, while 3 and 4 each have only one in six chances of happening. If the contestant sticks to his original choice, he wins in cases 3 and 4, but loses in 1 and 2. The total probability of a win is therefore $\frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{6} = \frac{1}{2}$. If he changes his mind, he wins in cases 1 and 2, and loses in 3 and 4; overall chance of a win $\frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{3} = \frac{2}{3}$. Mr Bellamy concludes:

"The Paradox, Mosteller sternly insists, is apparent only to those who fail to employ the proper sample space, which has to include the actions of the game show host."

But I am sure that will not totally cure Mr Carvalho's sleeplessness. For the real paradox lies not in the calculation of the probabilities, but in the nagging feeling

that the host's action in opening one door after you have made your choice is completely irrelevant.

Jim Bragg, however, has given us a very simple example that should cure any lingering example:

"I had difficulty intuitively (not logically) understanding why you should always opt to change your door, until someone explained it to me thus: The game show host offers a million doors to you. After you choose one, the host closes all doors except yours and one other. The odds on the other door having the star prize now seem a lot better, don't they?"

And that explains everything. A chap coming in from outside would still see only two apparently equal doors. You, however, would know that one door (your original choice) was picked at random from a million, the other was selected from 999,999 as the only one that might have a goat behind it. That's a very special door. Change your mind!

CHESS: WILLIAM HARTSTON

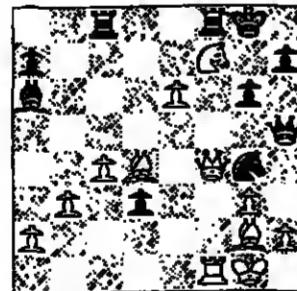
With one round left to play in the "Amber" rapidplay tournament in Monte Carlo, Vladimir Kramnik leads by half a point from Vassily Ivanchuk. In the early rounds, Kramnik built up what had looked like an unassailable lead, but he suffered a run of unlucky accidents in the second half of the event and the pack, which seemed at one stage almost to have given up chasing him, were again at his heels.

The one game that did more than any other to close the gap was Ivanchuk's win in his blindfold game against Kramnik. After the opening, the battle-lines were drawn when Black invaded his opponent's half of the board with 12...d4 and supported the pawn with 13...c5 and 14...e5. If Black's pawn wedge is not challenged, it will secure him a clear advantage.

Ivanchuk nibbled away at it with 17...exd4 when Kramnik rejected the natural recapture with the e-pawn in favour of the very aggressive 17...cd4, leading to a volatile position after 19.f4.

Kramnik replied with 19...Bc5, threatening to win the queen with d3+, while also defending his d-pawn to make ...exd4 a more attractive option. 20.Qd2 both got the queen out of the way of the threat of d3+, while also preparing to recapture on f4, if necessary, with the queen.

20...Qb6 virtually forced White into a promising

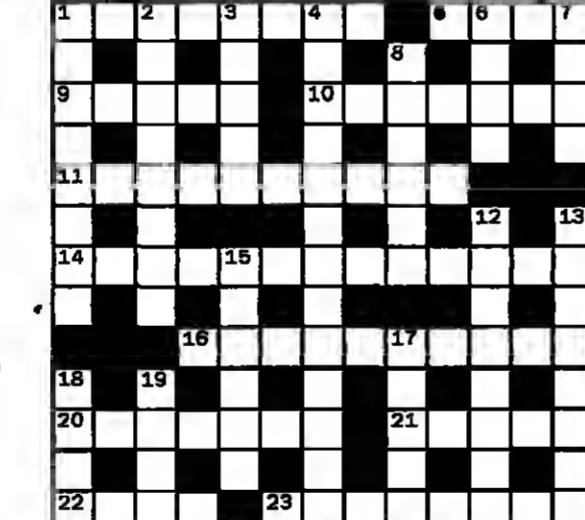


exchange sacrifice. After 21.Rxe1 Black could not move his knight from f6, but found a neat defence in 23...d3 (when exf6 loses to Rxel+) and 24.Qd8 (when exf6 is met by Rxel+ and Qxd4+).

25.Nxf7 was a clever way to solve White's problems. After 25...Kxf7 26.Bd5+, the bishop on d4 is shielded and White can play exf7 next. Kramnik went for complications, but fell for a neat combination at the end. In the diagram position, 29.Qxg4! Qxg4 30.Nh6 is mate.

CONCISE CROSSWORD

No.3570 Saturday 28 March



ACROSS

- Walking in step (8)
- Colouring agents (4)
- Bridge or tunnel charges (3)
- Person appointed (7)
- Spot cash (5)
- Counter-productive (4-9)
- Groups invited for job interviews (5,5)
- Cocktail (7)
- Male bird (5)
- Cable (4)
- Heavenly (8)
- Bull (4)
- Hun (Bullion) (4)
- Record player, 10 Centre, 13 Dental, 15 Civil Defence, 19 Sporting, 20 Fare, 21 Doe, 22 Delay.
- Lineout, 3 Yield, 4 Heavy, 5 Nigeria, 6 Scaled, 11 Escaped, 12 Eclair, 14 Needful, 16 Verge, 17 Egged, 18 Catty.

DOWN

- Part of bed (8)
- Dependable (8)
- Hurried (5)
- Individualist (13)
- Garden hut (4)
- Simple life-form (6)
- Tug (4)
- Flower (6)
- Serving-spoon (5)
- Gulf state ruler (4)
- Snare (4)
- Part of bed (8)
- Dependable (8)
- Hurried (5)
- Individualist (13)
- Garden hut (4)
- Simple life-form (6)
- Tug (4)
- Flower (6)
- Serving-spoon (5)
- Gulf state ruler (4)
- Snare (4)

Solution to yesterday's Concise Crossword:

ACROSS: 1 Bally, 4 Hun (Bullion), 7 Iron, 8 Exchange, 9 Record player, 10 Centre, 13 Dental, 15 Civil Defence, 19 Sporting, 20 Fare, 21 Doe, 22 Delay. DOWN: 1 Barge, 2 Lineout, 3 Yield, 4 Heavy, 5 Nigeria, 6 Scaled, 11 Escaped, 12 Eclair, 14 Needful, 16 Verge, 17 Egged, 18 Catty.

BRIDGE: ALAN HIRON

Game all; dealer South

NORTH
♦Q 10 6
▼10 7 5 3
♦K 10 6 4
♦Q 6

WEST
♦8 4 3
▼K Q 9 8 6 4
♦8 3
♦K 5

EAST
♦K J 9 5 2
▼none
♦9 7 5
♦10 9 7 3 2

SOUTH
♦A 7
▼A 2
♦A Q J 2
♦A J 8 4

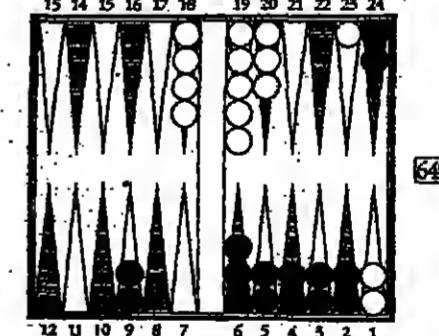
The contract and the opening lead were the same at both tables on this deal from a recent match, but the two declarers found different ways of going off in what should have been an easy contract. Neither South was prepared to discuss the matter, but I intercepted the match records before they "disappeared".

South opened Two No-trumps, North raised to game and West led ♠K against Three No-trumps. It was easy enough to win the first trick, but now the play diverged. One declarer continued with a low beat at trick two. West followed with the eight and dummy's ten won. It is true that South could still have succeeded by cashing winners and forcing West to discard a winning heart or bare his ♦K, but in practice declarer tried a simple club finesse and so went one down.

The other declarer, after crossing to dummy with a diamond, took an even earlier club finesse. He would have been home if the defence had continued hearts but, when in with ♦K, West smartly switched to a spade. Now there was no time for declarer to develop a second heart trick.

So what had they both missed? There was an absolutely foolproof approach: a low club from band at trick two. If West has the king and takes it, there are nine top tricks. If East turns up with ♦K then he is on lead and cannot profitably attack spades, whoever holds the king. And if he defends passively, South has plenty of time to establish his second heart trick.

BACKGAMMON: CHRIS BRAY



Here's a proposition that gave Murray Sharp, the sartorial king of the Double Fives Club, much enjoyment. Black doubles; should White take? Murray, who once dropped a double, but so long ago that nobody remembers the details, promptly offered to play the White side as a proposition. In a proposition such as this Black pays White one point per game to take the double and then the two players agree to play either a set number of games or until the losing player wants to stop.

Murray couldn't put a foot wrong. Either Black crashed his board by rolling big numbers, or he would get a well-timed one-point game and hit a shot to win. He went home a big winner. A few nights later he changed his arm and played the same proposition against Barry "Bigplay" McAdam. This time it all went wrong, and Murray quickly lost 30 points.

The difference lay not so much in the skill of the players, as this position is easy to play from either side, but in the vagaries of backgammon. At first sight this may look like a dreadful take, but although it is a drop it is not a drop by a huge amount. White does have two very reasonable winning game plans: Black crashing his board before he can escape one or both of his men, or White winning a well-timed one-point game, as Murray did in his first session. White will win fully 30 per cent of all games. What makes it a drop is the percentage of gammons that White loses when things go badly.

Over a short session of an hour or two, the defending side may get lucky. Over a longer period, Black will come out on top. Moral: when playing a proposition, choose where your skill can make a difference. In this example the game plans are clearly defined and the result, at least in the short term, is determined mainly by the dice.

Sugar sauce from the trees of Canada

A taste of... sweetness. Nikki Spencer enjoys a spoonful of maple syrup

Spring is in the air, and the sap

is rising in the deciduous forests of Canada, which account for 80 per cent of the world's production of maple syrup. Over the next few weeks local families and a growing number of tourists will head off into the bush to sample this year's harvest of maple syrup at sugar shacks dotted throughout the Maple Belt, the hardwood forest that stretches from the midwestern US through Ontario, Quebec and New England and into the Canadian Maritimes.

This winter's ice storms have caused concern to the sugar producers. Some maple trees have had branches broken off; others have split. The full extent of the damage won't be known until the harvest is over.

For a taste of maple syrup One of the most famous sugar shacks is the Sucrerie de la Montagne, 300 Rue St-George, Rigaud, Quebec JOP 1PO (001 514 451 5204), open all year round. For details of other shacks (which tend to open for about six weeks in March and April) contact Destination Quebec (0990 561 705).

Maple syrup can be bought in most supermarkets. There are three grades: dark, medium and light. The lighter-coloured syrup has the most delicate flavour and is best for waffles, pancakes and ice-cream. Dark maple syrup is used for cooking.

For a taste of home-cooked Canada, the Maple Leaf, 41 Maiden Lane, London WC2 (0171-240 2843) is a favourite with expats. As well as traditional pancakes with maple syrup, on "wing night" - Monday - they serve fried chicken wings in three flavours: mild, hot, and suicide. Ice hockey videos are shown in regularly from Canada.

A little goes a long way

Making it: creating a patchwork quilt can be as intricate and complicated as you choose, but one thing's for certain: it will broaden your horizons. Sally Staples joins the material world

When Anne Waring signed up for a course in patchwork, quilting and applique, she thought the lessons would be built round sewing bits of fabric together and learning some embroidery techniques. What she did not bargain for was being invited to create her own designs.

"At school, I thought I was bad at art. I spent an entire term painting rosehips, and eventually I was allowed to give it up. When I came here I thought I would never be able to design anything, but I've discovered I can, and it's a great confidence-booster."

Gillian O'Brien, tutor of the course, which leads to a City and Guilds Certificate, always enjoys showing students that they are not nearly as inept as they think. Design is an integral part of the course, whether it's quilting techniques or in applique.

"One of the exercises in applique and embroidery begins when I bring in a vase

of flowers and ask the students first of all to draw what they see," she says. "It is better to use a Biro, because then they produce good lines. If you give them pencils they will fuss, and keep changing what they've drawn."

The interesting thing is that each person will see those flowers in a different way and produce quite a different picture. It is not a question of getting it right or wrong; it is an exercise in gaining the confidence to express yourself."

From this initial design, the students then cut out pieces of fabric to echo the drawing. They are encouraged to cut freehand rather than trace their drawing on to material. The next stage involves ironing the flower shapes on to Bondaweb, a foundation that stops fabric from fraying and provides a stiff backing. The flowers can then be pinned on to a background material, ready to be sewn on with a variety of embroidery stitches.

Students learn a wide range of stitching, both by hand and on the sewing machines that line one side of the room. An experienced seamstress will pick up plenty of tips from the tutor, but if you are a complete beginner and can barely remember cross stitch from schooldays, it doesn't matter. In minutes you will be initiated into the intricacies of herringbone or buttonhole stitch.

Students work at their own speed – unsurprisingly, the class of 15 or so are all women – and can experiment with different stitches when sewing on each flower, leaf and stem. This teaches how to create different effects in applique, when a piece of fabric is embroidered on to a background. It is hard to believe that the immensely varied tableaux around the table were all inspired by the same vase of flowers; each one is completely individual in colour, style, shape and texture.

Gillian explains that the 35-week-long

course will allow students to build up a portfolio of work which includes patchwork, quilting and embroidery techniques as well as giving them an introduction to design. Each session is three hours.

"We start the course by discussing the use of colour," she says, "building up from primary, then secondary colours; then we mix them to obtain a wide range and apply them to a simple chart. Nothing is taken for granted. Not everyone knows that mixing blue and yellow produces green."

Ann Clark has completed her vaseful of flowers and is now concentrating on Hawaiian patchwork, which involves folding a rectangular square of paper and then cutting shapes from it to form a pattern. Using it as a template, the exercise is repeated in fabric. Once pinned to a background, the patterned cut-outs are hemmed with invisible stitches to give a contrasting effect to that of ordinary applique.

"We have learned so many interesting

techniques, and it is great fun to sit and chat with the others," says Ann. "Gillian also encourages us to visit exhibitions and art galleries. There is so much you can learn about colour and perspective in fabric design by looking at paintings."

Ann is planning to start work on a quilt shortly, but is not as ambitious as Kay Roy-Price, who has been steadily working over three terms to make two quilts for her twins, now 20 months old.

"Basically I chose different materials, designed a pattern, cut out the material and pinned it together, and then tacked each square by hand. After that you have to sandwich the wadding between the front piece of material and the backing. I have used a series of little knots throughout the quilt to keep the wadding in position."

It sounds simple, but these quilts, designed in bright pink, yellow and blue checks, have been a real labour of love. Kay works on them only in class, where she finds

the space and concentration that are in short supply at home.

Simple quilting techniques on squares are also taught on the course, and have inspired Yvette Taylor to make one for her baby.

"I'd never used a sewing machine before, and I certainly don't have one at home, but I've learned a tremendous amount from this course. It's a mixed group of people, and offers a peaceful way of learning something useful and having a good chat."

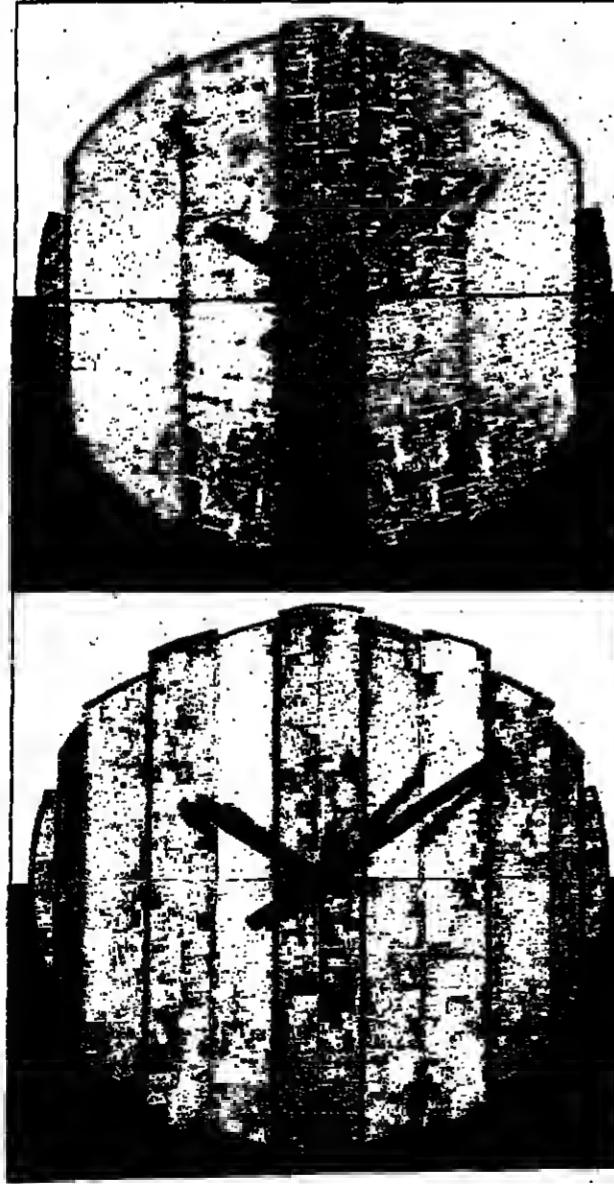
Gillian O'Brien's course on patchwork, quilting, embroidery and applique at the Kensington and Chelsea College lasts 35 weeks, and costs £144 (0171-573-3600). Weekend courses in the subject are offered through 'The World of Embroidery' magazine, and more information can be obtained from the Embroiderers' Guild, Apartment 41, Hampton Court Palace, East Molesey, Surrey (0181-943-1229).

In stitches: a well conceived design is central to successful quilt making

Photograph: Tom Pilston

The beauty of time passing

A clock designed specially for you? Spring forward and choose it, says Claire Gervat



eight weeks for your finished piece, since Gordon is also a full-time lecturer at the Gray's School of Art, part of the Robert Gordon University, where he studied before he went to the RCA. It's an association that is proving to be fruitful for the designer, giving him opportunities and encouragement to experiment with new techniques and create innovative pieces for exhibitions in Scotland, Australia, Japan and elsewhere.

Take, for instance, his foray into the world of CAD/CAM (computer-aided design/computer-aided manufacture). This enables him to "construct" clocks on his trusty Apple Mac at home, which are then made on the computerised milling machine at the university. By feeding images into the computer – video footage of the seaside, patterned paper, even his other clocks – Gordon can create unique and fascinating surface decoration on the aluminium, which is emphasised by the way it is folded into light-reflecting shapes.

So does he believe that craftspeople in general will be using computers more and more in future? "I think there's beginning to be a place for them, but the cost of the manufacturing end of it is the tricky bit; the milling machine at college costs about £50,000." This certainly puts them out of reach of individual craftspeople, although, as Gordon points out, designs can still be passed on disk to manufacturing companies for them to make up. There's an ironic twist here. Gordon is prepared to work with complex computer programs to create beautiful timepieces for others with not a digital display in sight (and a well-hidden quartz movement). Think about that as you scour the house tonight for the instructions for how to change the time on the video-recorder.

more than happy to create something special for an individual. The first step in commissioning one of his clocks is to discuss budgets, bearing in mind that prices start at around £200 for the simplest piece. The next step is to work out where the clock will hang, as this will influence the final design. That doesn't necessarily require a personal visit from Gordon, which is fortunate if you

don't live within stomping distance of his home town of Aberdeen. "Looking at photographs would be fine," he comments. "Working in a domestic situation is the same process you would go through when dealing with a company. It's trying to create something that reflects the personality of the company or individual, and the ambience that they're trying to convey."

Expect to wait around six to

DON'T MISS TOMORROW'S
INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

TRAVEL



THE LOST WORLD

Christopher Ely heads to Venezuela in search of the legendary Angel Falls

plus: New York for kids, a complete guide

On the level: the leading stables reveal their hopes

The top Flat trainers tell Ian Davies their horses to follow for the season ahead

JACK BERRY

"Red Symphony is a sharp sort who will be ready to run soon. He is going to be very speedy and is unlikely to stay beyond five furlongs. Queensland Star is another nice sharp sort who is owned by Alex Ferguson, manager of Manchester United. She's already much faster than Ryan Giggs and I expect her to win many more."

CLIVE BRITTAINE

"Circus is a nice colt who shaped well on his debut at Yarmouth and then received a knock when unplaced at Newmarket. He's by Caerleon and should stay middle distances and I'm going to start him off in the Dee Stakes at Chester before going for the Italian Derby. Pegnitz finished fifth to Xaar in the Dewhurst Stakes. He will stay a mile and should have few problems in winning."

NEVILLE CALLAGHAN

"Danetina has done really well from three to four and I reckon he can be champion sprinter. He was unlucky when demoted from second in the Haydock Park Sprint and, as he's not won a Listed race, he starts the season able to claim all the allowances in pattern races. I'll start him in the Abemant Stakes before better things. Subtle Influence had fair form in France and has won a maiden. He should be effective over a mile and a half. A two-year-old I like is Cashtara Beach. She is by Danchill, cost a lot of money and, although it is a case of hit and hope with two-year-olds at this time of year, I'm hoping she'll turn out really useful."

PETER CHAPPLE-HYAM

"Romanov did really well during the winter and, having out raced as a two-year-old, should show plenty of improvement. A mile and a half should be his optimum and I hope there might be a big race in him. I have no Classic three-year-olds - they've all been sold to Godolphin - but another one I really like is Carmine Lake, who won the Prix de l'Abbaye. I'm hoping she'll end up champion sprinter. Five furlongs is her best trip, but I hope she will last six too."

ROGER CHARLTON

"Tamarisk has grown a great deal over the winter and that



Tamarisk: "He could develop into a 2,000 Guineas candidate but, being by Green Desert, I think he'll be best at six or seven furlongs" - Roger Charlton

campaigned exclusively at five furlongs. Lead A Hand, who won the Gran Criterium in Milan, is in good form and will go straight for the 2,000. He should stay a mile and a half."

LYNDA RAMSDEN

The trainer's husband Jack, the respected professional gambler, says: "I bought The Real McCoy last autumn for two and a half thousand quid and the problem has been getting him to settle. My daughter Emma did the trick at Southwell in an amateurs' handicap in January and he won by seven lengths. He stays a mile and a half and started the season on handicap mark of only 45 on turf. He was beaten in a 10-furlong event at Doncaster on Thursday, but should be better for the run. Forest Robbin is a hit of a monkey, but is rated only 42 and a horse only needs to be able to keep out of its own way to win off that sort of mark. He stayed on well to finish second over seven furlongs, again with Emma riding, which is really a furlong too short for him, at Southwell recently. He wants a mile and is the sort that will run about 20 times during the year. Anstand is a nice big horse who was a bit weak last year but has now had three runs without being placed and is qualified for handicaps. He'll want seven furlongs to a mile and would not want soft ground. He is on a handicap mark of 68 and should be able to win off that mark."

JAMES TOLLER

"Teapot Row has not grown much over the winter but he was always going to be compact and I'm not too worried. He has not done much serious work but, if he shapes up, he will be trained for the 2,000. He won the Royal Lodge Stakes in good style but, although he is by Generous, there must be a slight doubt about him getting a mile and a half. Not that this would discourage me from training him for the Derby if he goes the right way. Duck Row has done very well physically over the winter. With hindsight, I should have put him away after he won his first race at Newbury. He had gone in his coat by the time he ran in the Horns Hill Stakes and did not give his running. He is likely to be best over a mile and a quarter but, if he suddenly starts to impress on the gallops, I'll work him with Teapot Row to see if it's worth sending him for the Guineas too."

Photograph: Dan Abraham

pleases me. He was very weak last year and, as a late foal, he needed to strengthen up. He could develop into a 2,000 Guineas or French Guineas candidate but, being by Green Desert - an influence for speed - I think he'll be best at six or seven furlongs. Spanish Fern was beaten two short-heads into third in Pontoon in Newmarket. She's a character but, if we can keep her under control, she may be good enough to win a Listed race over a mile and a quarter. She should stay a mile and a half.

PAUL COLE

"Windsor Castle has wintered extremely well and will have a Cup campaign. He won the Northumberland Plate and Queen's Vase as a three-year-old and I'm confident that he will stay extreme distances. Yorkshire has been gelded during the winter and it has done him a lot of good. He's a completely different horse now. He is no longer eligible to run in Group One races but there are plenty of Group Two and Group Threes around a mile and a half to aim him at."

HENRY CECIL

"Jibe, a daughter of Slightly Dangerous, is from a family that improves with age. She finished second in the Fillies' Mile at Ascot and, although she is not very big, I am hoping she will be good enough to tackle the 1,000

Guineas. She is a full sister to Yashmak and a half sister to Commander In Chief, who won the Derby for me in 1993, and Warming. Twickenham is a lovely colt who had a setback last year and is unraced. He is well worth following this year."

ED DUNLOP

"Old Tradition had knee problems last year and had spurs removed. She could start in the seven furlong maiden for unraced fillies at Newbury's spring meeting. Man Of Courage is a backward colt by Nashwan, who is a half-brother to the useful Bold Demand. He is a staying type who will not see a

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LUCA CUMANI

"High-Rise is a nice three-year-old by High Estate who won a seven-furlong maiden at Doncaster. He is going to stay a mile and a half. Emerald Isle is an unraced filly who has been shaping well and should be suited by a mile and a quarter. She should soon win her maiden."

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fully well during the winter and will be challenging for top sprinting honours. He will reappear in the Duke of York Stakes in May. Silver Patriarch has also done very well. He's put on weight and strengthened a lot. He will start off in the Jockey Club Stakes at the Guineas meeting and will be aimed at the top middle-distance prizes."

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WILLIE HAGGS

"Headhunter was third in Carrowkeel in the Gimcrack. I should have stepped him up to a mile but ran him in Newmarket's sales race over seven where he disappointed in fourth to Tamari. He might go for Kempton's Easter Stakes and then the Italian 2,000. Shredder is a smashing colt, who I trained like a beast last year. He ran brilliantly to beat a nose in the Prix d'Arenberg at Chantilly and was third to Grazia in Redcar's Two-Year-Old Trophy. I should go for Kempton's Easter Stakes and then the Italian 2,000. Shredder is a smashing colt, who I trained like a beast last year. He ran brilliantly to beat a nose in the Prix d'Arenberg at Chantilly and was third to Grazia in Redcar's Two-Year-Old Trophy. I should go for Kempton's Easter Stakes and then the Italian 2,000. Shredder is a smashing colt, who I trained like a beast last year. He ran brilliantly to beat a nose in the Prix d'Arenberg at Chantilly and was third to Grazia in Redcar's Two-Year-Old Trophy. 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Pienaar's desire fuels Sarries' cup ambition

By Chris Hewett
Rugby Union Correspondent

THEY may have just experienced the rugby equivalent of 15 rounds with Lemnos Lewis - or, to use a more brutal metaphor still, 15 minutes of negotiation with Cliff Brittle - but Sarries fervently believe they are in sufficiently good shape to survive the Northampton ambush at Franklin's Gardens this afternoon. This much is certain: if Tony Diprose's weary foot soldiers are to prove as good as

their word and beat a fresher, fitter Saints side to a place in the Tetley's Bitter Cup final, they will need to fly successfully in the face of all sporting logic.

There is only one thing more exhausting than winning a titanic top-of-the-table struggle on enemy soil, and that is losing one. Well though they performed at Newcastle on Wednesday night, the Londoners succumbed by five measly points; a result that should, in theory at least, have reduced them to a rag-tag collection of shambling mental

wrecks. "They fought us to a standstill, so I can't imagine how they hope to get themselves up for another huge match in so short a space of time," said Steve Bates, the Newcastle coach.

It is probably beyond Northampton's imagining, too. The Saints may have forfeited the influential services of their captain, Tim Rodber, but not even the most determined United Nations weapons inspector would relish a trip to the Franklin's Gardens bunker just at the moment. "The place is

like a pressure cooker," said Jon Sleathholme, their former international wing, yesterday. "Things are coming to the boil and at two this afternoon, the whole of Northampton will be out there on the pitch with us."

And yet Saracens have developed an esprit de corps of remarkable depth and potency this season, the result of Francois Pienaar's primal competitive instinct combined with an emotional collective desire to send Michael Lynagh and Philippe Sella into retirement with gold

medals around their necks rather than gold watches on their wrists. As Pienaar remarked in the aftermath of Wednesday's little epic: "If we play with the same skill and determination we've just showed out there, we can beat Northampton."

Two games of this magnitude inside 72 hours is, of course, ridiculous, but it's the job of the management and myself to pick everyone up. I have to admit that had we played badly against Newcastle and lost, it would have been terribly difficult to lift the spirits in time. But we didn't play badly; we played at a high pace and showed real commitment. Rugby is often as much about resilience in adversity as quality on the pitch and I think we have the character to respond."

Wasps, who revealed more character than anyone in winning last season's league title, will need to reproduce a fair proportion of it at Loftus Road this afternoon if they are to prevent the dangerous dark horses from Sale reaching their

second successive cup final. Unlike Sarries, their weariness has more to do with the dispiriting burden of under-achievement than the ravages of an intensely physical Premiership run-in and in many ways, it is a more corrosive condition.

An all-London final, then? Probably. But as Dallaglio went out of his way to emphasise earlier this week, form means nothing on last-four day. "Like every game, it's about 80 minutes of effort," he said. "Somehow, though, these particular 80 minutes bring a pressure all of their own."

Brittle threat to clubs' cup cash

IT IS far too early to talk about an endgame, but the interminable dispute between Cliff Brittle's wing of the Rugby Football Union and England's increasingly flabbergasted cabal of Premiership clubs is about to take what may be a decisive turn for the worse, writes Chris Hewett.

Brittle, the chairman of the RFU's management board, has threatened to withhold money to which the clubs claim they are entitled and they will meet counsel next week to discuss issuing a writ.

What is more, they have privately agreed to take the strongest possible action against any England player signing a new contract with the union that conflicts with his club agreement. "No club would select the player and no club would play against any side who did attempt to field him," said a clubs' insider last night. "As far as legal action over the money is concerned, we have been told that we are on the strongest imaginable legal ground."

As expected, the management board this week rejected the clubs' proposal to expand both divisions of the Premiership to 14-team leagues next season. Brittle then wrote to Donald Kerr, the chairman of the clubs' umbrella organisation, threatening to withhold Tetley's Bitter Cup receipts and RFU grant money in response to their decision to boycott all European rugby next term.

"We are amazed that Mr Brittle should threaten us in this way and it is very unfortunate that he should seek to link Carlsberg-Tetley to an unrelated issue the day before the semi-finals of the cup," said Doug Ash, the chief executive of English First Division Rugby. "According to our very strong legal opinion, the RFU has absolutely no grounds."

Invisible man turns Wasps eye-catcher

Chris Hewett talks to the awesome lock whose rediscovered sting could prove the end of Sale's Twickenham dream today

IT WAS, without doubt, one of the more remarkable rugby achievements of the century. Regardless of the fact that he tipped the scales at 21st - "one at a time, please," came the anguished cry from a chorus of breaking-speak-your-weight machines - and stood 6ft 9in in his size umpteen socks, Simon Shaw contrived to make himself invisible for the first three months of a Wasps career specifically designed to keep him in the public eye.

And how he paid for his subterranean profile. Clive Woodward and the Club England hierarchy made no serious attempt to track down the most explosively athletic lock forward of his generation; rather, they turned to Garith Archer, an old team-mate at Bristol, and fell in love with the Geordie's unsophisticated, teak-hurd brand of nonsense aggression.

By the end of last autumn's four-Test Sanza series, Danny Grewcock had also secured a place in Woodward's affections, and with Martin Johnson unchallengeable as the foreman of the Red Rose engine room, Shaw had completed a depressing journey from hero to zero, from top of the world to bottom of the scrapheap.

He took the precaution of arming himself with a return ticket, however, and he is now well on the road back to fame and fortune. Almost without warning, he has hit a purple patch of club form and his colleagues at Wasps confidently expect him to produce a decisive

performance in this afternoon's Tetley's Bitter Cup semi-final with Sale. What is more, Johnson's recurring groin problems may well free up a place on England's summer tour of the southern hemisphere. Suddenly, next year's World Cup is back on the Shaw agenda in capital letters.

Some of the 24-year-old Shaw's recent rugby has been on the stratospheric side of top-notch - "we've turned in a fair bit of rubbish on occasions, but Shaw's bang on his game," agrees Lawrence Dallaglio, the Wasps and England captain - and any second row capable of catching a wing as quick as Gloucester's Brian Johnson from behind has plenty going for him. Certainly, the Wasps back room staff are talking up his chances of a representative recall.

"I couldn't be more delighted with his progress," said Rob Smith, the Wasps and England A coach, this week. "Any player takes time to settle at a new club and Simon was no different after his move here from Bristol. There were fitness problems, too, and I think we all appreciated how much that changed the laws made life difficult for him. A 21-stoner is pretty valuable in a jungle, but he's bloody hard to lift. The fact that Simon has shed two stones - and it had to be two stones of muscle bulk, because he carries very little body fat - proves just how determined it is to get back."

Rather like the ancient walls of Jericho, Shaw came tumbling down just when he seemed at his most impregnable. A fixture in Jack Rowell's England side and an inimitable choice for the Lions squad, he was a white-hot favourite to partner Johnson in the series with the Springboks. God was in his rugby heaven and all was right with the world. Until, that is, Jeremy Davidson of Ireland steamed up on the rails and carried on galloping all the way into the Test team.

"What happened to me on the Lions tour hit me for six, to be honest with you," Shaw said. "I've never really spoken about it in public, but I felt there was an element of escapism when it came to the Test selection and it just so happened that I was in the wrong place, or the wrong side, at the wrong time. I played in most of the hard games leading up to the Tests

dons and ligaments by the dozen during Bristol's ill-fated tour match with Transvaal in 1995.

"I always have problems with the ankle," he says, winching at the mere thought of an injury that left his right foot at 180 degrees to his leg and the rest of a gaunt Bristol pack feeling physically sick and emotionally shattered at the sight and extent of the damage.

"Like any new boy, I was expected to earn a stripe or two on the Wasps second team at the start of the season, so I played on a rutted pitch at Sudbury, turned the ankle and that was that for a couple of months. But there were problems of adjustment as well. I'd spent the whole of my senior career at Bristol and it took time to feel a part of what Wasps were all about."

"Initially, I wasn't sure what was expected of me. I concentrated on getting involved in the loose, but I kept myself too wide in defence and failed to register the tackle counts the Wasps coaches were used to. Together with my fitness problems, it made first-team selection a bit of a struggle for a while and gave England every excuse to ignore me."

"When I started to miss out on England A games, I really was concerned. It was desperate to stay involved and although the selectors tried to reassure me by saying 'Look, we've seen you play at Test level and we know what you can do, so it makes more sense for us to look at a few other people', it was a bad time. In the end, what national coach is going to pick a player who isn't playing for his club?

Photograph: Peter Jay

Out of the woods: After loss of form and loss of weight, Simon Shaw is now playing his best club rugby with Wasps

Smart money on Monie's men to trouble Tollett's Broncos

Rugby League

By Dave Hadfield

A PERFECTLY respectable case could be argued that the Silk Cut Challenge Cup final that would do the game as a whole the most good would be between London and Sheffield.

The Broncos and the Eagles would both boost their profiles in cities where rugby league's roots are relatively shallow if they were Wembley-bound after this weekend, as well as reminding a wider world that the code has made some modest progress in expanding out of its heartland. Wigan and Salford

will have other priorities entirely.

In the first semi-final, at Headingley this afternoon, Salford can claim to have at least as good a back division as Sheffield, who replace the suspended Keith Senior with Willie Morganson after the Australian centre came through an A team comeback safely.

But the Eagles have John Lawless back at hooker and, if Paul Broadbent and Dale Laughton can reproduce the mighty form they showed at Castleford in the last round, the Sheffield front row could force Salford on to the back foot.

The Reds have the highly effective triangle of Steve Blakeley, Josh White and Martin Crompton, but the kicking game of Mark Aston is another factor that could just give the Eagles the edge.

Although Wigan and London were the two sides the others wanted to avoid in the semi-final draw, neither have had to fulfil their potential in the cup so far. When they meet at Huddersfield tomorrow, they will need to.

The London coach, Tony Currie, believes that his new forwards have yet to adjust to the different rhythms of the British game, coming as they do from Australia, where an unlimited interchange rule is in operation. If the likes of Mark Carroll and Grant Young do start to fire, they will be a handful for anyone.

The key to the match, though, could be the two stand-offs. Tuisen Tollett makes an unscheduled early return to the Broncos and rugby league after being released by Harlequins, for this weekend and probably for the whole season, and Currie has had no qualms about throwing him straight back into the fray.

"I've got no worries about it at all," he insisted. "We've had our best training sessions of the year since he's been back with us and he will add a lot to the side."

Wigan's John Monie was critical of his No 6 after the victory over St Helens in the last round, observing that Henry Paul had been "tentative".

A calf injury could have been partly responsible, but Monie is not averse to firing a warning shot across the bows of players not performing to their maximum.

He did it, to some effect, with Neil Cowie before the Saints game. Now that Paul is fully fit, the time is right for him to show his coach that he remains a match-winner.

Wigan make just one change, Denis Betts starting in place of Mick Cassidy. Tollett's return allows Peter Gill to move back to the Broncos' second row, alongside Steele Retchless.

Retchless has the name of a Mills and Boon hero, but looks, with his balding head and relatively slight physique, like the club accountant who has decided to join in at training.

He is a relentless worker and tackler who has so far been the pick of London's new imports. If Wigan click, he will have plenty to do - but the money in the cup must always be on Monie's men eventually getting on top of him and his teammates.

Eubank was probably thinking: 'I have failed!.. They still think I'm from another planet'

Sport on TV

By Chris Maume

COMEDIENNE in grey wig and charity shop dress gets celebrity guests on her show and takes the piss. They respond by playing along or displaying varying degrees of shittiness. Everyone goes home.

Mrs Merton (BBC1) is a one-joke show, and perhaps should have been a one-series show. You can always guess how particular guests are going to react, and the only variation is when someone like Bernard Manning comes along to subvert the formula, in his case by the simple tactic of being odious and repellent. Or there's a one-off like Chris Eubank, who behaved in his usual manner, like an alien beamed down to inculcate humankind into his planet's ways and demonstrate (unsuccessfully) that despite all physical and mental indications, they're really just like us.

This week's opening guest, Bar-

ry McGuigan, being a Really Nice Bloke, presented a dilemma. How could Mrs Merton possibly say nasty things about him? Especially as every mildly amusing remark sent him into life-threatening fits of laughter. So it was pleasing at the beginning when he played the unwitting diabolical constructivist, violating the show's central conceit by mentioning that he'd met her mum before the show. He hadn't, of course. He'd met Caroline Aherne's mom. No Barry, this isn't real life, it's only the telly.

Mrs Merton looked embarrassed (in fact, Aherne looked embarrassed) and stage-whispered, "Don't say that!" McGuigan, realising what he'd done, threw himself about the sofa in paroxysms of discomfiture, then compounded his faux pas by turning to Mrs Aherne's son in the mock audience saying, "Sorry, Maureen."

With Aherne unable to take the rise out of her guest, the whole point of the programme had gone, leaving only little conversational run-ups to her prepared jokes, the best of which came when McGuigan, asked about women boxers, said that although it was their democratic right, he felt queasy because of "wombs and other parts of the anatomy." Aherne replied: "Well, the lovely thing is, in here, most of us have had our wombs removed anyway." Well, I smiled faintly.

There was passing evidence from Aherne of Eubank's strangeness, incidentally. "I was a bit worried about him," she said. "He didn't know what he'd done, threw himself about the sofa in paroxysms of discomfiture, then compounded his faux pas by turning to Mrs Aherne's son in the mock audience saying, "Sorry, Maureen."

Afterwards, the lads indulged in some male bonding on the sofa. "That's for my dad," McGuigan said of Kennedy's performance. "Your dad," the violinist said pointing at him, with the heavy emphasis of a closing-time philanthropist. For a second, the two of them sat in silence with the intent expressions of drunks trying to express their feelings about their best mate. You almost wanted them to let it all hang out - "I really, really love you! Come here, you big husband, and give us a hug!"

There was a fascinating hour and five minutes of much-delayed highlights from the Winter Paralympics in Nagano on BBC2 this week, which was a bit on the stony side when you consider the relatively intensive coverage the Olympics enjoyed. It was also apparent that able-bodied Auntie Beeb hadn't bothered to ask any

one to stay on in Japan, the commentaries quite audibly emanating from a cubicle in Television Centre. Still, the papers don't seem much better, so I'd better shut up.

I was intending to cast my rod in the waters of Fish TV (Sky Sports 3), hoping they would be stocked to overflowing with chances for a cheap laugh. Sadly, I could do no more than dip my toes. But then again I'm not an angler, so what could I expect? There was as much going on as in one of those New Age aquarium videos. The quintessential exchange, and the one that pushed my mental off button, came a few minutes in.

"What do we do now?"

"Well, we cast... and wait."

After that for me, I'm afraid, despite the absence of any Cosa Natura connection, it was a case of "he sleeps with the fishes".

CHRIS MAUME

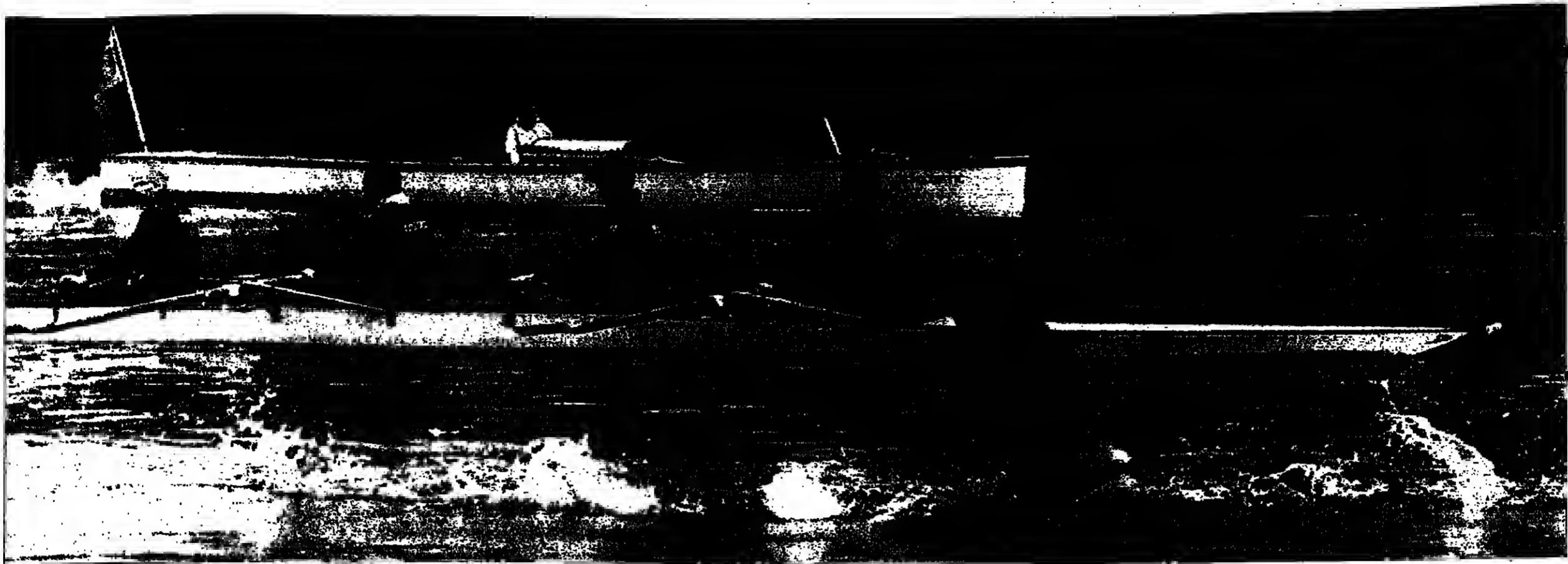
Sport on TV

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This week's opening guest, Bar-



Tall order for Oxford in land of Light Blue giants

By Hugh Matheson

THE Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race will be a test of power versus glory. The power rests undoubtedly with Cambridge and the glory will be Oxford's if they can pull off victory against the greatest weight disparity in Boat Race history.

The Cambridge crew this year is another in the five-year sequence of winners that is founded on a large pool of long-limbed athletes, many of them trained on the premises but underpinned by some of the best and brightest foreign talent with the savings to pay the fees demanded for a postgraduate degree. This year, the Light Blue colours are borne by the tallest selection ever and the concrete underpinning comes from a German stern pairing of world champions, Marc Weber and Stefan Forster.

. . .

and natural rhythm. It is a crew that will have to be close up and in the race at half-way to stand a chance. If they are swept away off the start the chance of recovery is slight, because the Light Blues will relax and recover and use their superior power in bursts to stay ahead.

. . .

Searching for a weakness in the Cambridge line-up is a forlorn task. The stern pair took a long time to be agreed by the coaches, but now that it is in place it seems the only solution. Forster's great strength and attack are used to transmit an inexorable drive down the boat

Oxford are quite simply not as strong or as distinguished in

past achievement as Cambridge but have, through the leadership of their young president, Andrew Lindsay, and the coaching of Sean Bowden and Renee Mijnders, who led the Dutch to Olympic triumph in Atlanta, produced a crew with a wonderful efficiency of movement

the Cambridge style to give the crew time on the recovery between strokes. Behind them, Alex Story and Toby Wallace are two younger Brits with abundant natural talent. Story came through the British junior system after starting as a teenager in France before reaching the

and natural rhythm. It is a crew that will have to be close up and in the race at half-way to stand a chance. If they are swept away off the start the chance of recovery is slight, because the Light Blues will relax and recover and use their superior power in bursts to stay ahead.

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British national eight for the past three years. Wallace is a 6ft 7in, 15 stone natural who learned to row at Cambridge. The quality does not drop off in the bows. Graham Smith, at bow, stroked the British Olympic eight in Atlanta and at 14st 7lb is the heaviest bowman ever. In front of him Jonathan Bull and Paul Cunningham are two more home-grown Light Blues blessed with size and strength who blossomed in last year's Goldie boat which was arguably the faster of the two Cambridge winners on the day.

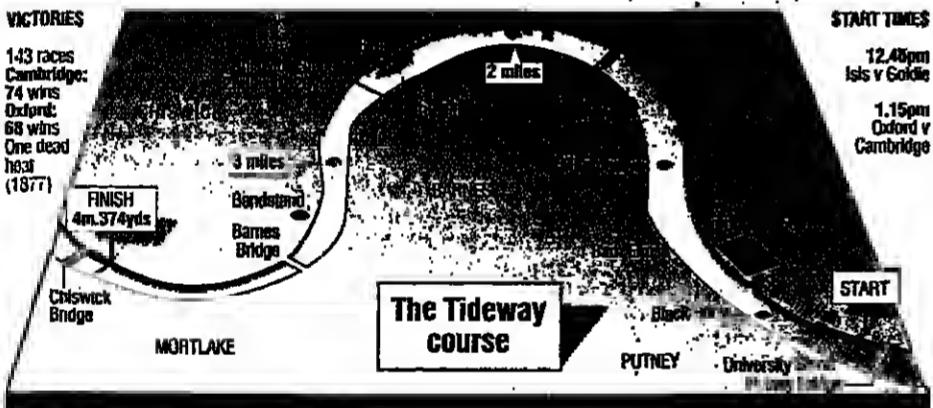
The cox, Alistair Potts, who won the seat only at the last minute from Suzie Ellisan, is an

Olympic cox with 10 years' experience on the Tideway. He surprised both the umpire and the Oxford cox, Alex Greaney, with an eccentric course in Thursday's rehearsal, and a similar line in the race would lose it. But he may have been bluffing.

Oxford have been characterised throughout as a crew to win it in a normal year and on any measure of student rowing in the world are superb. But the 13lb a man weight disadvantage is a lot to make up. Nick Robinson at stroke is smoothly rhythmic and sends a flow right down the boat which allows the heavier guns behind him to let the boat run and do some of the work for them.

Critical has been the positioning of Paul Berger, a 25-year-old American, at seven. Four square behind Lindsay are Ed Coode, a world bronze medallist in the coxed four last year, Henrik Nilsson and Jürgen Hecht, who, in their late twenties, are tough campaigners with precise knowledge of how to sell themselves dearly over the whole course; and in front of them the tall bow pair are well levered for the fluid style. But while they look more graceful throughout and possibly quicker at the start it may be a dark day for the Dark Blues.

The 144th Boat Race



Oxford	Cambridge
Bauer, C Hampshire*	Boyer, G Smith
(Hampton & Oriel GB, age 21; Height 6ft 3in, weight 12st 11lb)	(Westminster, Univ Coll London, & St Edmund's) GB; 22; 6-3; 14st 7lb
J Hecht (Göttingen Univ, Ger, & Kable) Ger; 26; 6-7; 14st 1lb	P Cunningham (British School, Brussels, & Gates) GB; 20; 5-6; 13st 6lb
E Coode (Eton, Newcastle Univ & Kable) GB; 22; 6-4; 14st 6lb	J Bull (RGS Newcastle & Emmanuel) GB; 25; 6-5; 15st 1lb
P Berger* (Univ of Pennsylvania, USA, & Lincoln) US; 25; 6-6; 14st 6lb	T Wallace (K Edward VI, Southampton, & Jesus) GB; 21; 6-7; 14st 12lb
Cox: A Bradney* (Abingdon & St Edmund Hall) GB; 22; 5-11, 14st 6lb	S Foster (Oxford Univ, Germany, & Peterhouse) Ger; 26; 6-6; 16st 12lb
Average weight: 14st	Cox: A Potts (Winchester, Edinburgh Univ & Trinity Hall) GB; 25; 5-5; 15st 5lb
* denotes Blue	
Average weight: 14st 13 lb	



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ROBERT HALLAM



Tales from the riverbank: Oxford (top) coast as a Canada goose skims the surface of the Thames while (above left) the Cambridge finishing coach, Harry Mahon, issues orders through a loud-hailer. Cambridge prove they are not too big for their oversize boots by squeezing into their Wellingtons; an aerial view of the Oxford boat captures the symmetry of the stroke pattern; the Dark Blues display their musical talents on some sponsor-decorated instruments and (bottom) the Cambridges and Goldie crews stride out over the water.



كتاب من الأهم

Montgomerie made to pay for short-iron shortcomings

Golf

By Andy Farrell
in Pointe Vedra Beach, Florida

WHEN Bernhard Langer, who had never previously missed the cut in the US Players' Championship, starts with a triple-bogey and has a double three-hole later in an opening 80, you know things are going somewhat awry.

But Langer has not been the only European to suffer at Sawgrass. Colin Montgomerie, who with Langer was expecting to

contend in the biggest tournament outside the four majors, looked like missing the cut for the first time at Sawgrass since 1992.

Already Ian Woosnam had already been forced to pull out, when he was five over after 12 holes of the first round, with a recurrence of his back problems. Woosnam will though try to play in New Orleans next week to prepare for the US Masters.

A nightmare front nine of 41 from Darren Clarke meant he missed the cut at nine over-

after a 79, while Monty went to the turn in 39 to be five over par.

His feelings were evident from the way the logo on top of his visor was pushed firmly forward as he walked down the fairways. At the fourth, his approach spun back into a tuft of rough by the edge of the water and when he took three to get down the ball was delivered at velocity into the pond.

His three bogeys on the front nine further depressed the Scot, but the damage had been done on Thursday after-

noon when he dropped five shots in five holes. Montgomerie has not been putting as well as usual over the last month, but his short iron play was the primary cause of his first round 74.

With only a sand wedge in his hands, Monty left himself in three-putt territory at both the 15th and the first, and duly made bogeys. Later he would miss the green at the sixth with the same club. But his most costly error came at the short 17th, where his nine-iron tee-shot bounced off the green

into the water leading to a double-bogey.

"It was very, very poor," Montgomerie admitted. "I have no excuses. The late tee time did not look good but it was fine as the wind had calmed down and I didn't take advantage. I made mistakes from good positions."

While Langer, with no hope of making the cut, attempted to recover some confidence with a front nine of 33, three under par, Jose Maria Olazabal slipped to a 74 to be in danger of not qualifying at two over.

Olazabal has tried more than 15 different drivers since finding the one he used earlier this year, when he won the Dubai Classic, had a hairline crack in it. "It was not the driver," he said. "I didn't do anything right. In the first five tournaments of the year I felt I had control of my game. I was driving well, hitting my irons well and putting well. Now everything has gone."

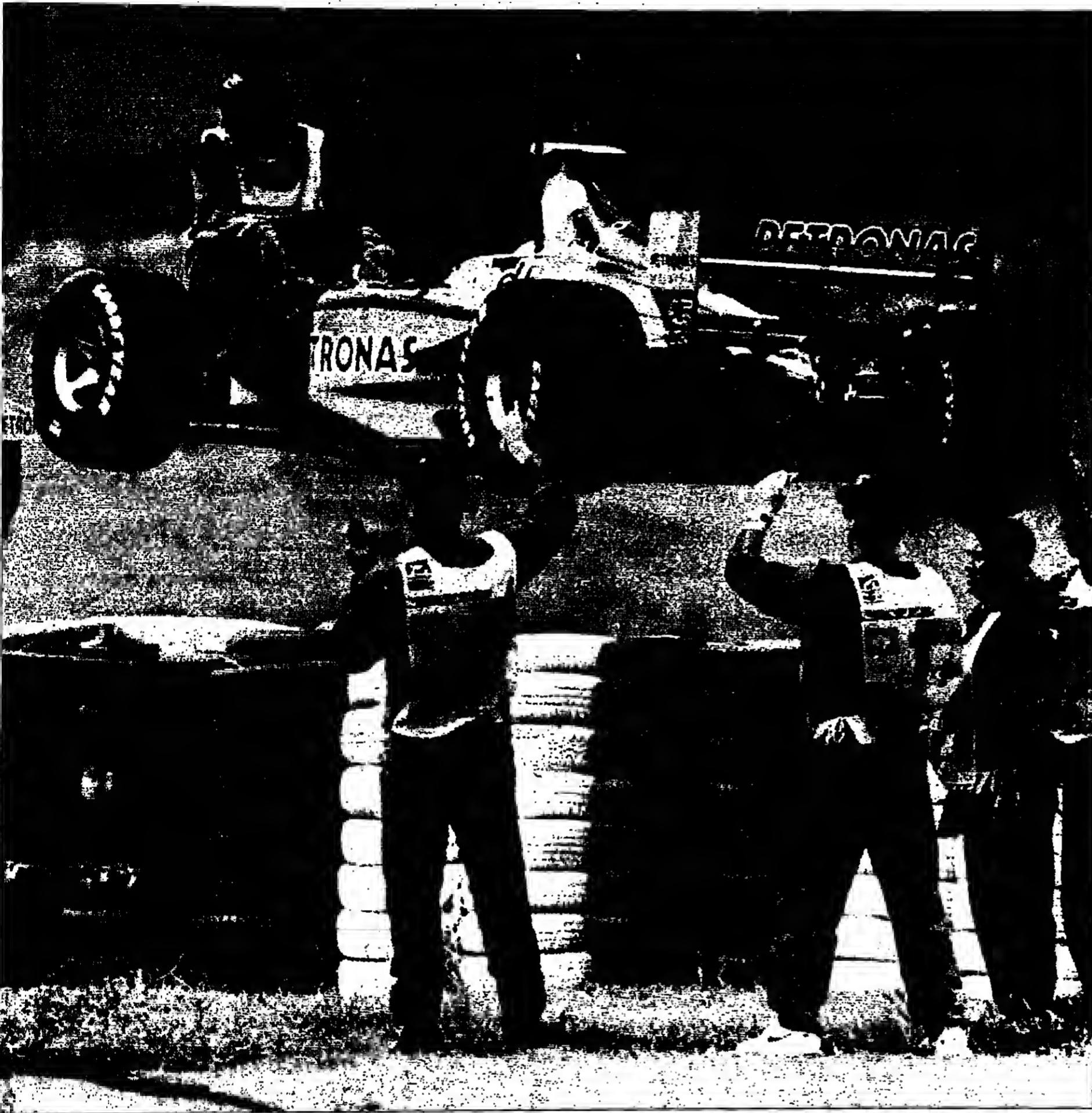
The Spaniard played for the first two rounds with first round leader Glen Day, a resident of Little Rock, Arkansas. Day

could not repeat the spectacular adventures of Thursday and a 73 left him at five under, two behind Lee Jansen, who scored a 67 to lead by one from the former US Ryder Cup captain Tom Kite, who had a 66.

Day's put figures for the last two holes were three shots more than he took in the first round when he birdied the 17th with a nine-iron to 10 feet, and holed a seven-iron from 180 yards at the last. It was the first ever eagle at the last in 16 years of the tournament being staged on the Stadium course.

"It was just lucky," Day said. "The shot felt good, but my first thought when the ball went into the hole was, 'good, now I don't have to worry about keeping Christina (his two-year-old daughter) quiet while Daddy puts'."

There was more excitement at the island green of the 17th when a seagull picked up Brad Faxon's ball and dropped it into the water. The American was allowed to place a new ball where the old one had first come to rest, but bogeyed the hole anyway.



Hoping hands: A recovery crew removes the Sauber of Britain's Johnny Herbert after he had spun off during practice for the Brazilian Grand Prix yesterday. Photograph: Reuters

All-conquering Ayr ready to extend reign

Ice hockey

ONLY the Cardiff Devils stand between Ayr Scottish Eagles and British ice hockey history at Manchester's Nymex Arena today.

The Eagles are aiming to add the Alamo Play-Off trophy to their Superleague crown. Extras and Benson & Hedges

Cups. All-conquering Ayr have brushed aside all before them this season, including Cardiff as they started their silverware sweep with a tight 2-1 victory in Ayr they lost 7-2 at home.

Ayr will be without their long-term casualty Jeff Head, while Cardiff have a full squad available with Mike MacWilliam playing with a damaged hand and Vito Sacchini on the bench despite a recent groin injury.

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AROUND THE RESORTS

Resort	Comment	Area open	Last snow cm	Lwr cm	Upp cm	Forecast
ANDORRA	Spring slush conditions	100%	12.3	80	80	Sunny spells
AUSTRIA	Top runs laded with fresh snow	100%	23.3	70	80	Sunny intervals
BULGARIA	New dry snow	100%	23.3	100	100	Blue skies
CANADA	Mainly firm-packed snow	100%	21.3	200	200	Rainfall
FRANCE	Frogs Des Alpes - fresh, groomed snow conditions	85%	24.3	50	280	Sunny periods
ITALY	Snow also has packed powder	100%	22.3	90	100	Sunny periods
NORWAY	Good firm-packed snow	100%	14.3	45	80	Bright intervals
ROMANIA	Packed dry snow at all levels	80%	15.2	55	55	Variable
SPAIN	Spring slush conditions	90%	12.3	20	50	Bright
SWEDEN	Firm-packed powder snow	20%	18.3	5	25	Cloudy/rainy
SWITZERLAND	Fresh groomed snow	100%	24.3	65	80	Bright
UNITED STATES	Spring slush conditions	90%	19.3	80	125	Partly cloudy
Switzerland	Spring slush conditions	90%	19.3	80	125	Partly cloudy

Show Reports supplied by Ski Hotline

Kournikova and Williams come of age

John Roberts, in Key Biscayne, considers the young talents who contest the women's final of the Lipton Championships today

WHEN Richard Williams held a hand-written card above his head at the start of his 17-year-old daughter Venus's latest win against Martina Hingis, the world No 1, he was suspected of coaching. Unless there is a code to be cracked, the message - "My wife is the best wife in the world" - was simply a compliment to his better half, Oracine.

And why not? For all the criticism levelled against the Williams family for shielding Venus and their younger daughter, Serena, from junior competition, the pair are manning into perhaps the most exciting sister act tennis has known.

Their performances this week have illuminated the Lipton Championships here alongside another prodigy, the stunning 16-year-old Anna Kournikova, who has caused hearts to flutter, on the court and off it, en route to her first WTA Tour singles final.

Venus Williams versus Anne Kournikova in the title match today is a promoter's dream, the first meeting of the tall, powerful, athletic American with the beaded braids against the lissome, Americanised Russian with the long, flowing ponytail.

Apart from adorning the court, both can hit awesome shots and compete with a passion, as we saw when Williams

last summer that Hingis was a shrewd tactician whereas Williams and Kournikova had all the shots but were not certain when to bring them into play. Since then, Kournikova has sought guidance from Graf's former coach, the Czech Pavel Slozil.

"Pavel has helped me a lot mentally," she says. "It's great to have somebody every day with you on the road, talking before the match and after the match. He hasn't really changed my game, like I said, I could probably do any shots I want. It's just everything in my head. I have to prepare and learn how to win matches."

While the Williams sisters were deliberately held back from competitive tennis, Kournikova has complained of being restricted by the age eligibility rules. It does not appear to have harmed her long-term prospects, bearing in mind that she reached the Wimbledon semi-finals on her debut at the All England Club last summer.

Four wins in four days against 10 opponents has raised Kournikova's ranking from No 25 to 20. "I proved to

were both a little bit tired in the third set."

Hingis said she was tired after playing two tournaments in a row. "I think she used that as an excuse," Kournikova says. "I don't think she really means that. Of course she's tired. She's been on top already for quite a long time. Physically, everybody gets tired, but mentally. You should just take a couple of weeks off, get ready for a tournament. I'm not tired at all."

"There's a lot of changes right now, in this tournament, in women's tennis. It's going to be something different, something new."

Williams, who reacted to her win against Hingis by performing a little dance and then hugging her father in the crowd, was asked if she thought the match was the major turning point in her career. "I think my career's been turning for a long time now," she said. "I don't think it's a major turning point in my career."

"I was tired of losing in ridiculous ways. I knew I was a better player. It's OK to lose, but just to go out and lose 6-0, thicks of that nature, and to play badly, that's different."

Defeating Hingis guarantees her a place in the world's top 10. "I haven't arrived yet," she says. "I'm just coming on, my way."



Kournikova: 'I'm smarter'



Williams: Overcame nerves

23/FOOTBALL

Gazza and Merson has ring of fantasy football

A CUP final, the ongoing battle for promotion, the arrival of another international star, and one of our own scoring for England... just an average week for Boro fans like me.

OK, I exaggerate – but we've got used to bouncing up and down between divisions in recent years. We've grown accustomed to the unveiling – and pretty rapid departure – of exotic talents such as RavANELLI, Emerson and JUANITO. As a youngster the Anglo-Scottish Cup Final (we beat Fulham over two legs) was my idea of a big cup final. Tomorrow's trip to Wembley makes it three in a year.

Gazza's arrival, though, is special. Unthinkable five years

FAN'S EYE
VIEW
NO 247
MIDDLESBROUGH
BY
JAMES HELM

ago, we're now in the market for the game's big names. Last time he played in Middlesbrough, his path was carpeted with Man bars. This time he'll be greeted with garlands. Boro fans across Teesside have their scissors poised to perform Gazza-cut for the area's young men. Others may be bracing themselves for his arrival too: sports injury clinics

and local journalists for example. But Gazza in a Boro shirt at Wembley – what a thought.

Some fans think we've splashed out on an injury-prone liability who'll bring us all the wrong headlines. I can see the point, but on purely sporting grounds the pairing of Gascoigne and Merson has the ring of fantasy football about it. All it needs now is for Juninho to hop on a plane from Madrid and fly in to Teesside Airport.

If Gazza still appears on the front pages as often as the back then Paul Merson has learnt to confine his activities to football. It was a just reward that his goal helped England out of

a hole in Switzerland this week. He's been a revelation in a red shirt – the Juminio figure for this season, adding spark and invention. He might have moved into Ravelin's old house, but there the similarities end. Merson's knuckled down, kept his mouth shut, given everything – and must now have a trip to the World Cup to look forward to this year.

It's been a strange transformation for the fans. Once we pored over the back pages for the tiniest mention of Boro. Now Bryan Robson's side provides big news and high drama. Whichever TV producer picked Sunderland as the subject for the *Premier Pas-*

sions

series must be kicking themselves. The much better tale of dreams, squabbling and ultimate disaster was happening a few miles down the A19.

Last season rendered football's clichés inadequate. It was a roller-coaster ride, and at the end of the day we were sick as parrots. This year, however, is threatening to push it closer.

A couple of weeks ago I saw the game at OPR, shortly after Boro's scintillating win over Liverpool and the derby triumph against Sunderland. We'd also lost to Forest, but there were few warning signs of the miserable, almost comical night at Loftus

Road. Squeezed into the away end, half-time saw us four down and in a state of denial. I stayed on – and we lost 5-0.

A couple more wins, the unfolding chaos up the road to Tyneside, and the purchase of Gazza has helped put the spring back into the step of Boro's faithful. Now it's Chelsea again, and the prospect of revenge for last year's FA Cup final. If we can keep them out for 50 seconds, then who knows? Surely we can't leave Wembley empty-handed for a third time.

Admitting allegiance to Boro last summer brought a strange reaction: deep pity mixed with side-splitting hilarity. This year it might be dif-

Graham fumes over Kewell ban

By Rupert Metcalf

THE Leeds United manager, George Graham, yesterday hit at the Australian football association for being "absolutely disgraceful" in banning Harry Kewell from playing in Monday's Premiership fixture at West Ham.

Graham pulled his young striker out of the Australian Olympic squad's current three-game friendly series with Brazil after he aggravated a groin injury in the 5-0 win over Derby two weeks ago. The Elland Road manager thought that would be the end of the matter – but now Soccer Australia has asked Fifa, world football's governing body, to invoke its five-

day rule to prevent the 19-year-old from lining up against the Hammers.

Graham said: "This is an old problem raising its head again. Harry had been carrying a groin injury for some weeks which flared up against Derby. We took him off as a precaution and we thought he might be OK again, with treatment, for the trip to West Ham."

The Australian FA then got in touch with Fifa and they invoked a rule saying that Harry cannot play the next League match for us, which I think is absolutely disgraceful. The player is contracted to us, we are paying him financially. It's not the associations paying the players' wages, it's the football

clubs. It's time the associations and the clubs had a better relationship and understanding.

The boy wants to play for Leeds, but they are stopping him from working. They are preventing a player from doing a job of work."

If AFC Bournemouth win the Auto Windscreens Shield when they play Grimsby Town at Wembley on 19 April, they want to play in Europe next season. The Second Division club are to ask the Football Association if they can compete in the InterToto Cup. "If San Marino can play in the World Cup, and Barry Town in the UEFA Cup, I don't see why Bournemouth can't play in the InterToto," their chairman, Trevor Watkins, said yesterday.

The Hull City chairman, David Lloyd, has threatened to end his funding of the struggling Third Division club but there was better news for Burley. The Turf Moor club's directors have agreed to a £1.2m takeover offer from Peter Shaderton, a businessman, and life-long Burley fan who is supported by five Swiss bankers.

Wolverhampton Wanderers have added David Connolly to their stock of strikers. They registered the 20-year-old Republic of Ireland international just prior to Thursday's transfer deadline.

The former Watford forward, who has initially been signed on loan from the Dutch club, Feyenoord, has agreed a four-year contract with the First Division side. A fee of £400,000 has been agreed. "When a club like Wolves come in for you, you don't hang around," Connolly said. He should be eligible for the FA Cup semi-final against Arsenal a week tomorrow.

Fifa's general secretary, Sepp Blatter, yesterday confirmed that he will be a candidate to replace Joao Havelange as president. The only other candidate for the post is Lennart Johansson, the president of Uefa, European football's ruling body. The election will be in Paris on 8 June.

"I want to make it clear I have had no part in this and at no time has the issue been about money."

"The reason I spoke out on Monday is that I wanted the truth to be known. I asked for a clause in my contract that would enable myself and Celtic to review the situation after my first season."

"I have had some discussions with the club this week and these will continue in the coming weeks. There is no April 1 deadline. I want to assure everyone that I fully intend to be at Celtic at least until the end of the season. As for the future I will make a clear decision in due course. I have nothing further to say on this matter."

The turmoil at the club is such that even today's top v second match against Hearts at Parkhead has become overshadowed. Third-placed Rangers are at Dunfermline.

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This came after Jansen, revealed on Monday that in his current three-year contract he has a clause which allows him to leave in the summer and is "still thinking" about his plans.

Other than reiterating his "disappointed" stance regarding Jansen making a private contractual agreement public knowledge, Celtic's general manager, Jock Brown, was at his most reticent, deferring every question to Jansen.

Brown insisted he believed it "not in the club's interest" to react to Jansen's latest statement, adding only: "Wim has said it all. We now want this matter to rest."

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Gascoigne's presence lends final fizz

By Glenn Moore
Football Correspondent

LUCKY old Football League. A few months ago their flagship cup competition seemed destined to follow tracing, lace-up footfalls and knickerbocker shorts into the history books. Uefa, the governing body of European football, had taken away the reward of a cup place and leading Premiership teams were fielding near-reserve sides as a result and talking of winding up the competition altogether.

Yet tomorrow, as a result of hard political bargaining by the League's leaders, and sheer good fortune, the Coca-Cola Cup final will attract more attention than for several years.

The prime reason is, of course, Paul Gascoigne. Will he play, and will he this time leave Wembley in style rather than on a stretcher? But there are other intriguing questions. Will Gianluca Vialli lift a trophy just a one month into management? Or will Middlesbrough, in their third successive final, finally gain their first major honour after 122 years of trying?

A European bow also beckons.

Win and Boro get a Uefa Cup place by right. Loss, and they can still qualify if Chelsea win the European Cup-Winners' Cup as the Londoners would be defending that next season.

The one thing we can be relatively sure of is that it will be a better match than the FA Cup final between the two sides. Theo Chelsea went ahead when Roberto Di Matteo scored after just 43 seconds and their victory, confirmed through a second-half Eddie Newton goal, was far more comfortable than the 2-0 scoreline suggested.

Few would have predicted that the same two teams would not only return for the next Wembley final, but that Bryan Robson would be the surviving manager. His Middlesbrough side may now may now be in the Nationwide League but they are a far more competitive side than last May when they were low on bodies and confidence.

Though they have lost Juanito, Fabrizio Ravanelli and Emerson, Boro now have a better-balanced squad. Last May Bryan Robson had to play Ravanelli at Wembley though he was not fit but now, even with four

Chelsea v Middlesbrough	
PROBABLE TEAMS	
Graeme Le Saux or Steve Clarke	Curtis Haining
Conor Casey	Neil Ruddock
Frank Lampard	Marco Branca
Ed De Goey	Mark Hughes
Michael Duberry	Dennis Wise
Frank Sinclair	Gianluca Festa or Steve Fritsch
Player-manager Gianluca Vialli	Paul Merson
Gianluca Vialli	Andy Townsend
Don Patresi	Robbie Mustoe
Hamilton Ricard	Mark Schwarzer
	Nigel Pearson
	Craig Harrison
	Manager Bryan Robson

players including Alan Armstrong cup-tied, the Boro manager's problem is the enviable one of who to leave out. He has used 24 players in the competition and now has Hamilton Ricard and Gascoigne also available.

Gascoigne is likely to start on the bench, but the Colombian may partner Marco Branca in attack. With Robbie Mustoe recovered from back trouble, Gianluca Festa is likely to play at the back if he passes a test

on his calf strain. The biggest relief is Mark Schwarzer's recovery from a thigh strain, the only other eligible goalkeeper being Peter Shilton, now 48 years old.

"Last season the lads were just

happy to get to Wembley," said Robson, "but this time there is a much different approach. They want to win and believe they can, they are more confident of their own ability."

Gianluca Vialli has a similar selection difficulty to Robson with the added dimension of his own position to be considered. "All I am interested in is seeing Chelsea win the cup," he said, "whether I'm on the bench or involved in the game. I still care about myself as a player but now I am manager and my decision will be entirely about what is best for the team. I will lead the team out but I'm not saying whether I will be in a suit or my football strip."

The latter is more probable as Vialli, who was given a token two minutes by Ruud Gullit in May, is likely to at least be on the bench. One suspects he will play with himself, Zola and either Mark Hughes or Tore Andre Flo in attack though this runs the risk of leaving the midfield light in numbers. An alternative is to play Eddie Newton in midfield to pick up Paul Merson, newly recalled by England and a childhood Chelsea fan. The real

problem area is at the back where Chelsea will inevitably have moments of indecision even if Graeme Le Saux recovers from his ankle injury. If Merson or Gascoigne can take advantage Branca could upset his better-known compatriots.

Vialli may be fortunate to have replaced Gullit with Chelsea only one match from Wembley but that game, the 3-1 semi-final, second-leg win over Arsenal at Stamford Bridge, has been their only convincing win in the competition. Of the previous four ties they had drawn two and lost one, twice going through on penalties and once in extra time. They have also had a constantly changing side, in those four matches Gullit used 26 different players.

Boro have won six of their seven ties but form will count for little. As with most games involving Chelsea the result will probably be settled by their own performance. If they play to potential they will win, but if not Boro are very capable of punishing them. The destiny of the 38th Coca-Cola Cup thus hangs on Vialli's nascent tactical and motivational ability.

Italian hitmen set for Wembley reunion



Marco Branca used to play alongside Vialli, but is planning to ruin his big day. Simon Turnbull on the new Boro hero

MIDDLESBROUGH never has been the best of places for the football sons of Italy. It was at the late Ayresome Park that North Korea inflicted the defeat which sent the World Cup Azzurri of 1966 home to a bombardment by tomatoes at Genoa airport. Then, of course, there was *la penna bianca*.

Teesside was tickled at first by the White Feather. Thrice on his debut day against Liverpool at the start of last season Fabrizio Ravanelli performed his trademark goal celebration. But the man from Perugia could not pull the wool – or the synthetic fibres – over the eyes of the Riverside crowd for long.

He might have been rather fond of throwing the arrows on the oche of his local, the King's Head in Hutton Rudby, but it became clear through the course of last season that Ravanelli simply wanted to take his Middlesbrough money and run.

He wrote his name in the club history books with the goad that would have beaten Leicester City in the Coca-Cola Cup final a year ago, had Emile Heskey, "Bruno" to the Fibertel Street faithful, not delivered an equalising punchline deep into extra time.

Ravanelli remains the one and only player to have scored a goal for Middlesbrough at Wembley. He is, though, remembered at the Riverside more for the dressing-room unrest he caused as Boro strove in vain to preserve their Premiership status and then returned to the Twin Towers as FA Cup final fodder for Chelsea.

Middlesbrough are back at Wembley tomorrow, to face Chelsea in this season's Coca-Cola Cup final, and once again they have an Italian in their vanguard.

Marco Branca has been a Boro boy for just five weeks, a £1.3m signing from Internazionale. Already, though, he seems more settled on Teesside than his attacking predecessor ever was, conducting a conference in passable if halting English at Middlesbrough's press day on Thursday afternoon. Branca certainly cut a strikingly different figure to Ravanelli, who never even bothered to grasp the rudiments of the language.

He formed a bright double act with the Italian who has been the most conspicuous success of Bryan Robson's overseas recruitment drive to date. Gianluca Festa, a stable influence in Middlesbrough's defence and in the dressing-



Breaking the mould: After the Ravanelli débâcle, Marco Branca has changed the perceptions of Middlesbrough fans about Italian strikers

Photograph: Simon Wilkinson

foot shot through the legs of David James, that booked Middlesbrough's third trip to Wembley in 12 months.

"I think he gave us a hand for winning the cup," Festa said, answering the inevitable question about Paul Gascoigne's arrival. "Speak in English," Robson quipped from the aisle.

The Italians laughed along with the audience and their departing "gaffer". Communication, clearly, is not the problem it once was at Middlesbrough.

Robson is running an altogether happier ship down at the Riverside.

"I am here because I want to play in the Premiership," Branca said. "I was determined to come to England. I wanted a new experience, a different atmosphere."

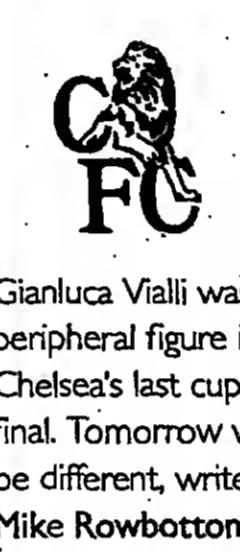
He got that on his debut night at the Riverside, the return leg of the Coca-Cola Cup semi-final against Liverpool. And he responded with the fourth-minute goal, a right-

ly acquainted with two notable members of the Chelsea set. Branca was Gianluca Vialli's attacking partner in the Sampdoria team that won the Serie A scudetto in 1991. He also played alongside Gianfranco Zola at Parma.

"I have kept in contact with them both," he said. "I spoke with Gianluca after the Liverpool semi-final but not before this match. He is very busy in his double job at Chelsea and I am busy in my new job here."

"But he told me it is very prestigious to be playing at Wembley. I believe him. I played there for Inter in the Mafita tournament. It is also very prestigious for our fans. It is something very beautiful for them. I will be doing everything to make sure we win."

And that will add a new dimension as Boro bid for their first major trophy: an Italian striker fully committed to the cause.



Gianluca Vialli was a peripheral figure in Chelsea's last cup final. Tomorrow will be different, writes Mike Rowbottom

GIANLUCA VIALLI'S cameo appearance in the last few minutes of the 1997 FA Cup final seemed to come as much by public request as anything else.

Before he left the arena, he made a very obvious point of applauding the fans who had so insistently demanded his appearance. To many it seemed as if the 33-year-old Italian was making his farewells after a season in which, to his patent frustration, he had been rotated in – but mostly out – of the team.

Even Vialli thought it might be goodbye. "I wasn't sure if I would be part of Chelsea the following season, and I wanted to thank the supporters because I had a special..."

Someone supplied the word "rapport" and he nodded.

How curious then, that 10 months later, Vialli should find himself in something akin to a *Groundhog Day*. Tomorrow's Coca-Cola Cup final sees him back in the same place, faced with the same team, and able to make the occasion dramatically better for himself. The question remains – will Chelsea's player-manager give himself the nod?

Mark Hughes, one of four forwards including Vialli who have had to accept the inherent frustrations of Chelsea's squad rotation system, was in no doubt yesterday what action he would take if he were in the same position. "If I was him, I wouldn't leave myself out," Hughes said with a broadening grin. "I'd be the first one on the team sheet!"

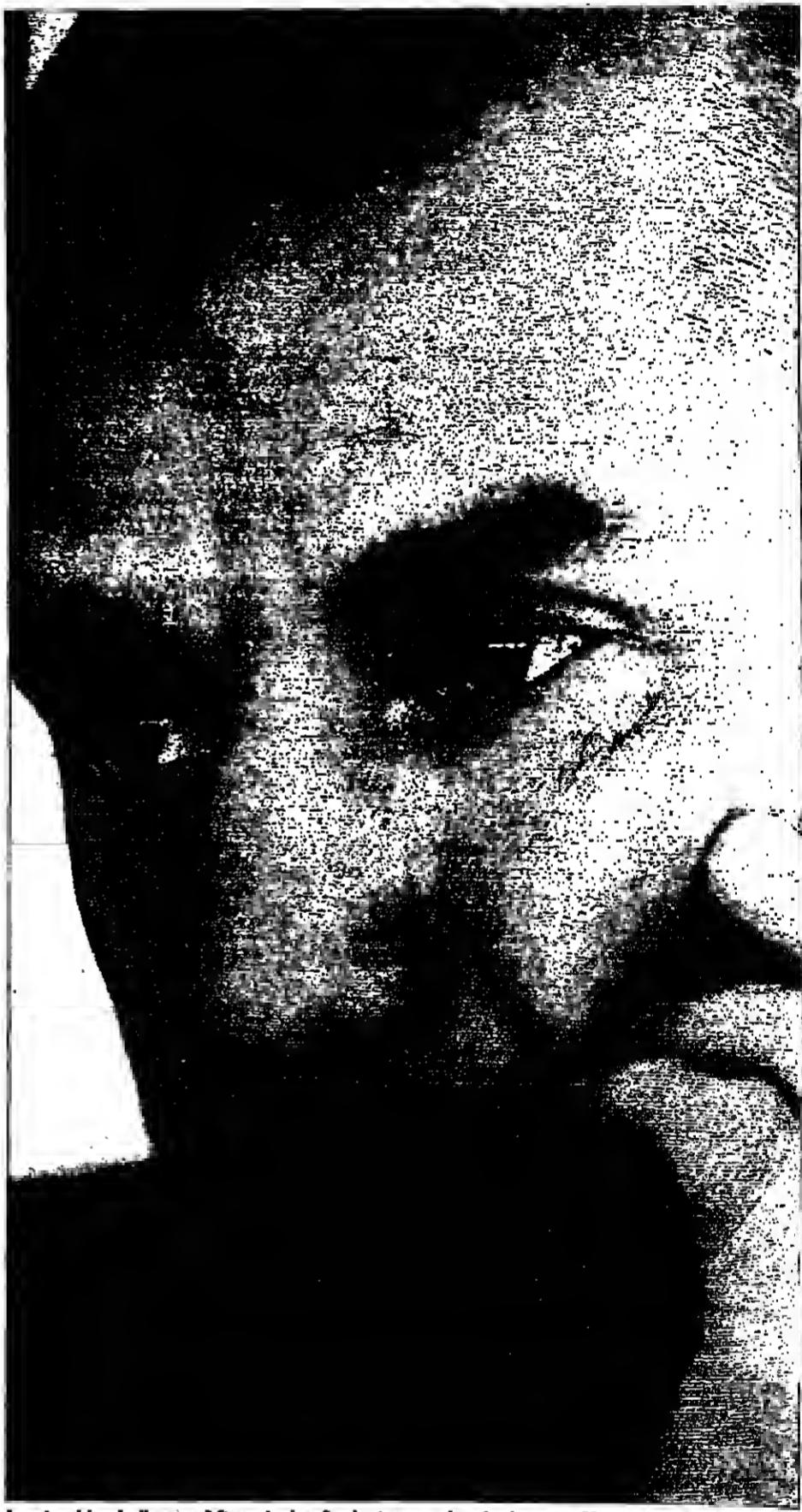
Vialli, however, has wider considerations now. The man who used to amuse himself on the training ground by capturing his farts in cupped hands and releasing them into his teammates' faces has had to alter his act since taking charge from Ruud Gullit last month.

Asked if he felt he should give himself a Wembley chance, he replied: "No. I have to give Chelsea a chance." Managerial, or what?

"If it means to my opinion that I have to play, I will," he added. "Otherwise I will sit on the bench because the only thing I care about is Chelsea and not myself as a player. Whatever happens, I will have my game."

For all Chelsea's cup success in his charge – next on their fixture list is Thursday's European Cup-Winners' Cup semi-final at Vicenza – Vialli is not taking anything for granted against a Middlesbrough side which looks eminently capable of returning straight back to the Premiership.

"It won't be easy," he Vialli. "I think we are good enough



Leadership challenge: After playing for just a couple of minutes of last year's FA Cup final, Gianluca Vialli must decide whether to pick himself tomorrow

Photograph: Empics

to win the game, but Middlesbrough can say the same. It will be a very tight game," Managerial, or what?

The presece in Middlesbrough's side of two fellow Italians, Branca and Festa, is one which Vialli openly acknowledges as a threat. "To be honest, when I play against Italian footballers I am always very aware, because I know that Branca and Festa and players like them can always cope with these important games. They can be decisive and I would rather not play against them."

He also acknowledged the potential danger of the man who remains an honorary Italian to Lazio supporters. "He is one of those players who, all of a sudden, with a bit of magic, can change the game," Vialli said of Paul Gascoigne, whom he witnessed first hand while playing for Lazio for Juventus.

"It won't be easy," he Vialli. "The problem with players like Gascoigne is that you become so afraid of them you forget about playing your own game. This would be dramatic for us. Terrible. So we have to give Gascoigne and Branca special attention, but we have to play like Chelsea usually play."

A large part of that style, Vialli is careful to point out, is down to the work of his predecessor. "I have to be honest and recognise that if we are at Wembley it is also because of what Ruud Gullit did at the beginning of the season, because he brought the team up to the semi-final."

The pressure which he has inherited from the Dutchman is something with which Vialli is still coming to terms. "Things are getting better," he said. "If you get used to something the pressure gets lower, so I need time to come down. But now I'm calm and relaxed. I know it's difficult."

And Hughes is clearly desperate to play in what would be a 10th and possibly last Wembley cup final of his career.

Who would be a player-manager taking those decisions? Vialli would. "It is something exciting and new," he said. "Something I want to do. It is wonderful to think that after 17 years of football playing I am still having such a wonderful feeling. I know that I am very lucky."



YOUR MONEY

Personal finance and property

Saturday 28 March 1998

Silver screen opportunities

Titanic profits, and losses, can be made in the film industry. Paul Slade reports on ways to spread the risk, and the tax incentives

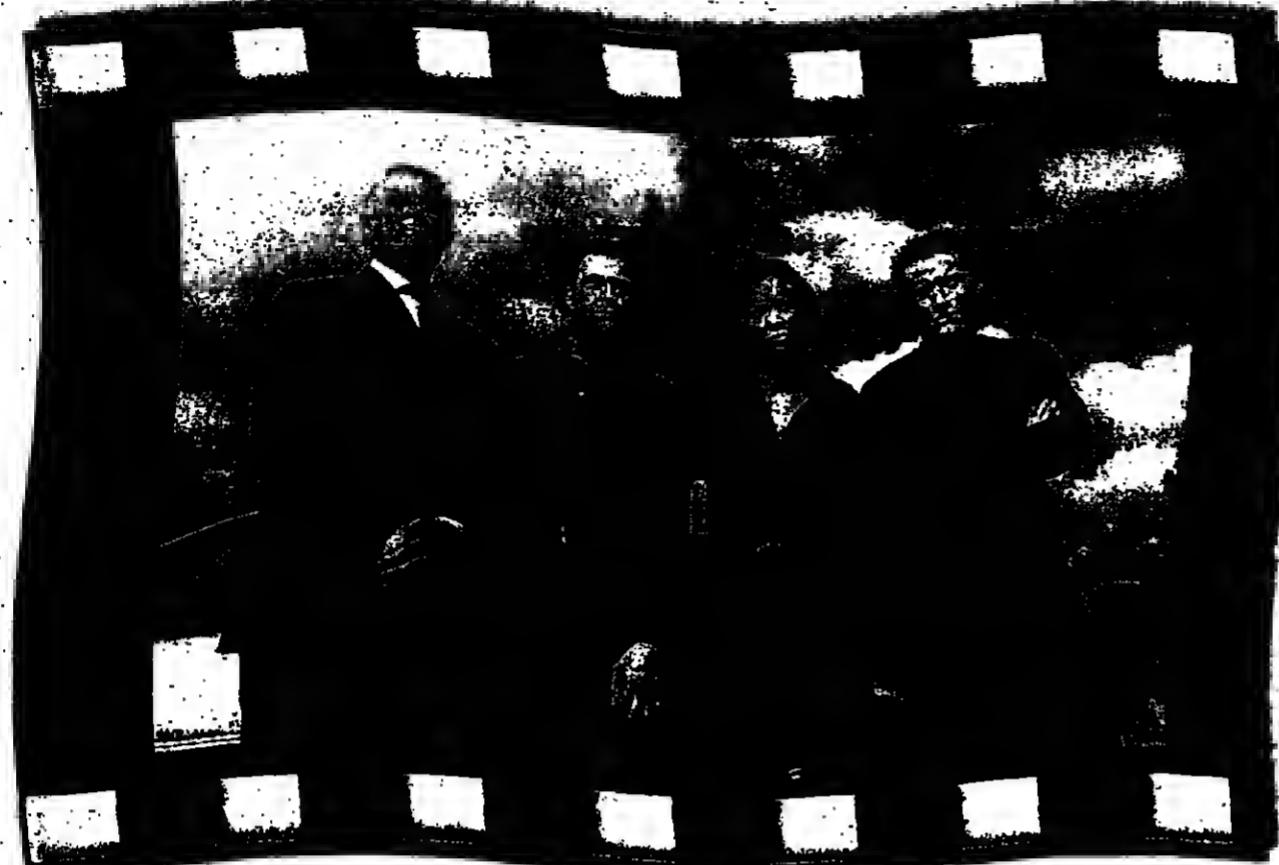
The world-wide success of British films like *The Full Monty* – despite its relative lack of Oscars at this week's awards in Los Angeles – and the prospect of a host of new television stations has given UK film-makers a tremendous boost. Small investors too can get a slice of the action.

In fact, some parts of the entertainment world have always enjoyed backing from investors. Angels with just a few hundred or thousand pounds to invest have been backing West End theatre for decades. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, for example, raised all its initial £450,000 capital from small investors who bought £750 units in the show when it opened in 1981...

But opportunities to back independent cinema are far less developed. Some films will send out prospectuses to potential investors, whom they hope to encourage with invitations to special premieres or the chance to appear as an extra. This may be fun, but the chances of ever seeing your 'money again' are pretty slim, as all your investment will be riding on just one film.

The alternative for small savers is to buy shares in a film company such as Metrodome or Winchester Multimedia, both of which are listed on the Alternative Investment Market (AIM). Metrodome has now moved into distribution, but was responsible for funding *Leon the Pig Farmer*. Winchester provided the funds for *Shooting Fish*.

Buying shares in a company like one of these means you



spread your risk across the company's whole portfolio of films, increasing your chances of finding a winner. If the company's films are successful, investors benefit from a rising share price.

Metrodome's managing director, Alan Martin, says: "I would always advise someone to try to get involved in a spread of films. Remember, that's what the big studios do. When they do a *Titanic*, they get it right and everything washes its face. But if they make loads and loads of mistakes too."

If you're tempted to back a single film, Mr Martin says, the key is to be confident the people involved have a good track record, and that the sales side is properly organised.

He says: "Always make sure there is a proper, established sales agent attached beforehand who is keen on selling the film. And

make sure there is a UK distributor involved. What you don't want is to be involved in a film that gets made, and then it's hauled round by the producer trying to find a sales agent."

It is also important to be clear just where in the pecking order small investors come if the film should ever show a profit. You should also be clear just which rights you are buying a part of – cinema release, video, television or all three – and which parts of the world each of these apply to.

Richard Platt is an actor and director who is about to start trying to raise money for his first full-length feature, called *Operation Elvis*, a film about a 10-year-old boy who thinks he's Elvis Presley. With a cast of unknowns and a shoot of about six weeks, he thinks the film could be made for £1.2m.

His first film – the 30-minute, award-winning *May Day May Day* – was made in 1996 at a cost of £38,000. That price was possible only because the actors agreed to work for nothing.

This money cleared out much of Mr Platt's savings, built up from his acting roles and a couple of lucrative television commercials. Mr Platt plays Jamie White, the pub landlord in television's *Park Practice*.

He says: "When you put money into a picture for the first time, you're actually investing in the talent of the writer, the director and the team. Say I go on to Hollywood and make a *Full Monty*. The first people I go to when I want to raise money again are going to be the same people who had a share in my first film picture.

Then, of course, the rewards are much greater, because you've got more money to play with."

Like Mr Martin, he says distribution is the key. He showed *May Day May Day* to a cruise ship audience last year, some of whom were sufficiently impressed to say they might invest in *Operation Elvis*. But Mr Platt wants at least an agreement in principle on distribution for the film before he calls them back.

"I can't possibly go to people and ask them for money until I've got some kind of outlet for it," he says. "I'll get my editor to put it together as we shoot, we'll make trailers and hawk those around as we shoot. If I die doing it, I'm going to make this damn film."

The industry also benefits from several tax breaks. These are designed to encourage investment in risky or unproven businesses, and film production qualifies on both counts.

Investors with big profits from other shares can defer payment

Professional backing: Investment companies offer an easy route into film finance, and the chance to invest in projects like the revival of the classic 1970s' TV series

Illustration: Jonathan Anstee

of capital gains tax (CGT) through reinvestment relief. The old shares can be sold with no CGT to pay, providing the money is reinvested in a qualifying unquoted company within three years of the sale. Companies with an AIM listing are not excluded.

Matrix Films & Television is one company pulling in funds through this route. The two projects it has helped finance so far are Mike Leigh's *Career Girls* and a revival of 1970s' TV series *The Professionals*, starring Edward Woodward and due to screen later this year. Matrix finds its investors through the UK's network of independent financial advisers.

Nile Bamford, company accountant at Matrix, says: "Our investors are people with CGT liabilities, and we can structure them into a scheme as reinvestment relief. They act as co-producers in the film or the TV series, and defer paying the 40 per cent CGT."

"So far, the minimum investment we've accepted is £100,000. That might come down, but it's a lot more admin work from our point of view if we lower that amount."

The enterprise initiative scheme is another way for big investors to get involved. This scheme, the replacement for the old business expansion scheme, gives tax relief at 20 per cent on sums of up to £150,000. This, again, is intended to encourage investment into risky ventures as film production.

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Enforced pensions

The prospect of enforced contributions by employees into pension schemes moved one step closer this week with the publication of the Government's Green Paper on welfare reform.

Frank Field, the Welfare Reform Minister, who unveiled the document – New Ambitions for our Country – A New Contract for Welfare – before the Commons, spoke of "duties on the party of Government... matched by duties for the individual".

Mr Field said: "It is the duty of government to relieve poverty in old age and regulate pension provision; it is the duty of individuals to save where possible for old age."

The move towards enforced contributions has been attacked in some quarters for leading to a pay cut for many workers. However, mortgage lenders welcomed reforms that will protect homeowners who suffer a reduction in income from being penalised for having taken out payment protection insurance.

Financial illiteracy

Many people are ill-prepared to make financial decisions because of poor "financial literacy", according to a new study by the Financial Services Authority (FSA), the City's leading regulator. The study, commissioned by the FSA, found there were major gaps in the provision of financial education, which has failed to match public need. The watchdog says it will be "devoting significant resources" to consumer education.

Kitemark for products

Poor financial education is one of several factors that contribute to investors' difficulty in understanding details of the products they buy, according to a new report by the Consumers Association. The report argues that "disclosure rules" whereby investors are told about charges and commissions are too hard to understand. It calls for a simpler regime, including the "kitemarking" of products. Page 7.

Mad monk's message

An early message scribbled by Rasputin in 1914 puts paid to claims that the "mad monk" could not write. His words may now fetch thousands of pounds at a forthcoming auction, along with autographs and messages from hundreds of famous people, collected over the years by one enthusiast. Page 8.

The dash to cash in on PEP allowances

Like greyhounds out of their traps, UK fund managers are streaking towards the 5 April end-of-year tax deadline, hoping to pull billions of pounds of investors' money in their wake.

They are banking – literally – on the new-found attraction for personal equity plans in the wake of the Budget announcement that PEPs will not have to be rolled into the new Individual Savings Account, up to a £50,000 limit, as first suggested.

The scale of cash pouring into PEPs in the dying days of this tax year is expected to reach almost £1bn in the next week alone.

Richard Wastcoat, executive director at Fidelity Investments, says: "Since the Chancellor gave the green light to PEPs in last week's Budget, we have seen a flood of new business. We are receiving over 8,000 calls a day and predict that the industry will receive over 500,000 calls before 5 April."

Mr Wastcoat says his company is ready to handle more than 75,000 more calls between now and the end of this tax year. Fidelity is planning to keep its offices in Tonbridge (Kent) and Reigate (Surrey), open until the last minute –

midnight on Sunday, 5 April.

Mercury Asset Management, another large provider, says it will accept applications for its PEPs until Saturday. Applications must reach its offices by post or they can be delivered by hand to its head office in London.

Other life offices are making similar arrangements. Among those expecting last-minute PEP bonanza are the UK's growing band of discount brokers, who sell cheap products by discounting the cost of their commission back to customers.

Don Clark, at PEPDirect, a Wolverhampton-based tele-

phone broker which charges £25 per transaction, says his staff have been raking in more than £1.5m a day into PEPs.

Amid the PEP-buying frenzy, however, it still pays to take care when selecting a product. Not only is the stock market a potentially risky investment, but the tax advantages of PEPs are not always the most important consideration for savers. If in any doubt, talk to an independent financial adviser (IFA) before investing.

– Nic Cicum

For a list of three IFAs nearby, call 0117 971177.

PEP deadline looms

Company	PEP application deadline
Legal & General (all others)	Thursday 2 April 5.00 pm
Legal & General (growth & protection PEP)	Friday 3 April 5.00 pm
Commercial Union	
GT Global	
HSBC	
INVERCO	
Perpetual	
Sains & Prosper	
Schroders	
Henderson	Saturday 4 April 12.00 noon
Jupiter	
Morgan Grange	
Fidelity	Sunday 5 April 12.00 midnight
M&G	
Virgin	

Source: Chase de Vol (0800 525 091) *Postal applications by Saturday 4 April

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PERSONAL FINANCE JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

A poor excuse for financial services

I am becoming rather worried at how little it takes for me to be thrown into fits of apoplexy. It could all be down to encroaching old age, I suppose. Except that my anger mostly manifests itself when I am forced to listen to the financial services industry's excuses.

My most recent fit followed the publication of a document by the Consumers' Association (CA) earlier this week into "disclosure". This is the term used to describe the supply of financial information such as charges and commissions, which policyholders need to know before they buy a particular product.

The CA report, written about in more detail elsewhere in this section, argues that the existing disclosure regime has failed to help consumers.

The information we are provided with, and the way we are given it, conspires to make it far easier for us to really understand what product providers are doing with our money. In fact, mistrust of the entire financial sales process is so rife, the CA found, that we tend not to read the product particulars even when it is relatively well presented.

The CA concludes that some form of rating system where benchmark figures are used to compare and rate products would simplify matters considerably. Minimum product standards, such as maximum charges, flexibility and so on, are another idea put forward in the report.

All this is something *The Independent* has been campaigning for ever since we began publishing analyses of the life and pensions industry by John Chapman, who de-

vised one such scheme several years ago (John's latest survey appears this week).

The CA's findings are so sensible that one would imagine financial regulators falling over themselves to support them. But no, the Personal Investment Authority (PIA) – the front-line watchdog responsible for protecting consumers – can't quite bring itself to do that. The PIA is reported in one publication as simply "noting" the Consumers' Association's views.

Wow. Each year, hundreds of thousands of policyholders are unable to understand the information they are given and buy inappropriate and expensive products. Meanwhile the PIA, whose inadequate disclosure rules have led to this position, "notes" attempts to suggest better alternatives.

Perhaps its reactions come from the same stable as those of a financial adviser who this week blamed the CA itself for consumers' ignorance.

According to him, the public feels ignorant not because it is given the wrong information badly, but because it is given any information at all. If we weren't told anything, we would have nothing to be worried about. Ignorance is bliss, in other words.

One can only hope the CA's report finds its way into the hands of people marginally more sympathetic to the concept of consumers as intelligent and rational human beings.

Meanwhile, the financial services industry might reflect on the fact that had punters been better informed and had the products sold been of a high standard, it would not be facing an £1bn bill to compensate victims of the pension mis-selling scandal.

THE MAKEOVER

Name: Ryan Williams

Age: 49

Occupation: Engineer

The problem: What to do with cash "slipping around" in a PEP, which he does not know what to do with. He is concerned that the UK stock market may be over-valued at present. The advice: Look to corporate bond PEPs as an alternative way of using your tax-free allowances with the possibility of some capital gains but without the same risk as with equities.

Ryan Williams is 49 and married with two children, both of whom have flown the nest. He and his wife are members of their employers' pension schemes. Their home is paid for and valued at around £150,000. He has some cash on deposit with a building society. Their major investments are in self-selected PEPs worth around £65,000, of which around £40,000 is currently held in cash. In addition, they hold around £10,000 of equities and Mrs Williams contributes the maximum in an employee share option plan (Esop). Both have Tessa's.

Ryan is concerned about the impact of the Budget on his financial planning, and is looking for suggestions regarding future investment strategy, with the main priority being capital growth. He earns £25,000 a year and has a company car. Mrs Williams earns £10,000.

The adviser: Bruce Clark of the independent financial advice firm Fraser Smith, Maple House, High Street, Potton Bar, Herts, EN6 5BS, 01707 672900 (the firm also has a London office).

The advice: Ryan and his wife are in a reasonably strong financial position, having paid off their mortgage. He has been a member of his final salary company pension scheme since he started work over 30 years ago and has regularly topped up his contribution each year to the maximum 15 per cent of salary allowed, via a free-standing

additional voluntary contribution (FSAVC). He pays pension contributions net of 23 per cent basic rate income tax, which is claimed at source.

He should continue to fund at the maximum level to the FSAVC to take advantage of the tax reliefs while they last. There is a word of caution, however. Ryan may be close to earning the maximum two-thirds pension and should check each year that his additional contributions won't result in an over-funding problem. Since it is possible to include all taxable emoluments, this rarely causes a problem. Pension schemes tend to provide benefits linked to basic salary only and so exclude bonuses and other benefits in kind, such as the company car.

To get a full picture of income in retirement, a forecast of the potential benefits available to both Ryan and his wife should be obtained, as well as a forecast of state benefits, which can be obtained by completing DSS form BR19. A cashflow management exercise can then be undertaken which will identify the income set to be generated from all sources during retirement.

The couple both have Tessa's. The announcement that existing Tessa's will be able to continue their five-year life span is to be welcomed. It makes sense to maximise Tessa's contributions to enjoy the tax-free benefits of this investment. Contributions to Tessa's can continue for their normal five-year life, and the capital value can then be rolled over to an Individual Savings Account (ISA) without impacting upon the normal annual allowance.

The future of PEPs was also clarified, with the £50,000 limit for transfer to the new ISA scrapped after sustained industry lobbying. This is good news for Ryan with PEP holdings of £64,000 and 1998/99 PEP allowances without impacting upon the

1997/8 PEP allowance and has been considering a corporate bond PEP.

A corporate bond is similar to a gilt issued by the government, except that it is a loan stock issued by a private company paying a fixed interest rate. The capital value fluctuates in line with market expectations, although they are more stable than equities. Ryan is concerned with the prospect of a single currency, but this development should see UK interest rates fall into line with the generally lower rates in Europe, and this is expected to boost the capital value of UK corporate bonds.

Ryan is holding so much cash in his PEP because of concerns about the height of the UK stock market, hence the interest in the corporate bond PEP. Mrs Williams should structure this by making use of her general PEP allowance. The fund selection can always be varied in the future. The relatively high yield available of, say, 7.8 per cent

could be reinvested to boost capital growth, as income is not needed now.

Corporate bonds could also prove to be a more attractive investment than cash in Ryan's PEPs for the reasons highlighted above.

Although the traditional bed-and-breakfast arrangements have been outlawed, selling part of their direct equity portfolio for reinvestment into the more tax advantageous PEP environment is still permitted, but care would have to be taken to ensure the gain on any shares sold remained below the annual CGT exemption. Indexation will only apply on gains until 5 April 1998, so short-term gains will be taxed at a higher rate, (40 per cent) than long-term gains, (24 per cent).

Mrs Williams has been contributing the maximum £250 per month to a Esop share scheme with her employer. The first tranche of shares is due in the next tax year, and any encashment could possibly utilise both of their annual CGT allowances. The shares have benefited greatly from the rise in banking stocks in recent months.

They have sufficient death-in-service and income protection benefits in the event of illness, provided by their employers. However, they do not have a will. This is a number one priority for them.

Their combined estate is more than the inheritance tax exemption limit of £223,000 (from 6 April), and a lack of some simple estate planning at this stage, such as planning to use at least part of the first nil rate band, could end up costing their children some of their inheritance, particularly if the more penal inheritance tax regime expected under Labour is introduced in the next few years.

They should also address the issue of long-term care in old age. The role of the state is being greatly reduced and, although we are awaiting the Royal Commission report on this, this is an issue of growing importance for many people like the Williams.

Spotlight: Invest On-Line's UK Tracker PEP

The Product: Invest On-Line's UK Tracker PEP.

The Deal: Invest the maximum £6,000 PEP allowance for the year and Invest On-Line, the direct marketing arm of Royal & SunAlliance, will give you some bargain basement charges.

The money goes into a tracker fund which aims to mimic the performance of the FTSE All-Share index.

Plus Points: It really is very cheap if you invest the maximum. A 0.3 per cent annual management charge is as low as it gets; even Legal & General's annual management charge is higher at 0.5 per cent (Virgin's tracker fund, once among the cheapest, is quite expensive now at 1 per cent).

Tracker funds have significantly outperformed active fund managers.

Gartmore, PDFM and Mercury Asset Management are all suffering from clients disaffected by what they see as poor value for money.

Drawbacks and risks: Many now believe the market looks pecky, having grown by 40 per cent in the last year. If it takes a downturn, trackers will take the full weight of any fall. Active fund managers may or may not

outperform a tracker in a sluggish market. In 1994, they did much the same as trackers. As with 1987 and 1990, two other occasions when stock markets fell and most managed funds failed to better tracker performance.

The charges have a few snags. Whereas L&G just has a management fee, Invest On-Line takes a bid/offer spread of 0.8 per cent. Still cheap, but

if you invest less than £6,000, there's a 2 per cent initial charge and a 2.7 per cent bid/offer spread, which is not so cheap. If you invest the same £6,000 with L&G through the PEP Shop in Nottingham (0115 9825105), you'll also get a 1 per cent cash rebate, worth £60.

Verdict: Cheap but not the cheapest, and safer investments exist.

Marks out of five: Three

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Best bets for carpetbaggers

Halifax's bid for Birmingham Midshires has opened the floodgates for yet more windfalls. Iain Morse reports

Just when building societies began to think it was safe to go back into the water, carpetbagging sharks start to appear all over again. Thousands of would-be members, temporarily denied the right to join up, have taken advantage of the new relaxation in the rules to begin queuing round the block once more.

The irony of all this, after almost nine months in which building societies have quietly been winning back business from their demutualised rivals, is that it flows from events at one society that had already sold itself off last year.

Birmingham Midshires,

which had been touting itself around the City for at least 12 months, finally found a buyer and agreed last summer to put a £630m offer from Royal Bank of Scotland to its members. The deal would have given an average payout of £630 per member. Then, earlier this month, Halifax stepped in to trump the agreed deal with a £780m offer for Midshires, producing an extra £150 per person.

The significance of this deal is the questions it raises about other societies, similar in size to Birmingham Midshires or barely smaller but equally highly regarded: if Halifax is so keen on

this deal, what might the others be worth to another buyer?

Last year, five building societies demutualised. Those who shared in the bonanza have been amply rewarded. Alliance & Leicester gave each member 250 shares last April, with an initial trading price of 542p per share. They now sell for around 927p per share.

Bristol & West paid an average £1,100 in cash to savers of two years' standing or more; Halifax's minimum share handout is now worth about £1,850. Woolwich and Northern Rock, with share handouts worth from £1,900 to £2,260.

Now Birmingham Midshires has re-opened the game many other societies are back in the frame. The question is: how to choose and how to join? If anything, things are easier now than they have been for months, as societies have relaxed their guard after last year's windfall fever.

But care is needed. First of all, windfalls are not guaranteed. Societies demutualising can

choose whether to distribute cash or shares. The law prevents cash windfalls to members of less than two years. Bristol & West gave this group preference shares, whose price is more a function of interest rates than company performance.

There are no statutory rules on the qualifying period of membership for share windfalls. A society could backdate this to the first press speculation on demutualisation. Others have increased the minimum balance to qualify. Nationwide has gone one step further: membership can be secured by depositing just £1 but new members are required to sign away windfall rights to charity.

However, some societies have reduced the minimum amounts needed to open membership accounts. Portman, the fifth largest, will accept just £100 to open a savings account. Bradford & Bingley opened a record 700,000 new accounts last year and does not deny bagging "baggers".

If Mr Thomas is correct, Bradford & Bingley must be a

front runner for conversion. Its chief executive David Rodriguez's last job was running Thomas Cook. He has already bought up specialist lender Mortgage Express and the estate agency chain Black Horse from Lloyds/TSB.

The chief executive of a society must get approval for conversion from board, Mr Thomas adds. "These are often composed of city types, who lose little sleep over giving up mutual status. Banks want to buy up building societies as a means of expansion. Finding an offer sufficient to tempt members with windfalls is not a problem."

If Mr Thomas is correct, Bradford & Bingley must be a



Conversion benefits Woolwich's share handouts are now worth £2,000 on average

shifted to mutual status". Few analysts are convinced.

Meanwhile, mutual life insurers are also coming under pressure to convert to PLC status. Norwich Union and the Australia's Colonial Mutual converted last year, with NPI and some of the smaller Scottish life offices tipped as future prospects.

According to Mr Thomas: "Smaller life offices can survive times of boom but will face difficulties if the economy slows down... Start an endowment or buy one second hand to benefit from windfalls."

CARPETBAGGING COSTS

Top 10 Building Societies – minimum opening balance for new members

Nationwide: £1 to open an account with member status, but windfalls go to charity.

Bradford & Bingley: £1,000 instant access, £500 for one-year bond, £10 monthly savings plan, £100 confers membership.

Britannia: £5,000 instant access, £2,000 five-year bond.

Yorkshire: £2,000 Tessa, 90-day account, or branch account, £3,000 postal account.

Portman: £100 branch instant access, £1,000 postal instant access, £500 one-year bond.

Coventry: £2,500 branch accounts and postal instant access.

Skipton: £2,000 branch instant access, and £5,000 for other accounts.

Leeds & Holbeck: £1,000 branch account, £2,000 postal account.

Chelsea: £1,000 branch or postal account.

Derbyshire: £1,000 in Derbyshire area, £5,000 elsewhere.

The tax regime of PEPs and ISAs may change, and the value of the tax benefits will depend on the individual circumstances of the investor. The price of investments and the income from them can go down as well as up, you may not get back as much as you invest. The value to you of the benefits will depend on your own circumstances. Past performance is not necessarily a guide to the future performance. M&G do not offer investment advice or make any recommendations regarding investments - we only promote the packaged products and services of the M&G marketing group. *Source: Micropal, 1st means top quartile to 1.1%, gross income reinvested for Blue Chip over 5 years and for Managed Income since launch on 1.3.93 and Corporate Bond since launch on 2.5.94. **There is a difference between buying and selling prices. Issued by M&G Financial Services Limited (Regulated by The Personal Investment Authority). Registered Office: M&G House, Victoria Road, Chelmsford CM1 1FB. M&G Unit Trusts are managed by M&G Securities Limited (Regulated by the FSA and The Personal Investment Authority).

ROBIN AMLOT
INTERNET
INVESTOR

Where angels go to find business opportunities

This month a new "stock market" was launched on the internet, the Development Capital Exchange (DCX). It is specifically designed for informal investment in unlisted small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs).

These are companies looking for anything between £10,000 and £2m in funds, which do not meet bank lending or venture capital criteria. DCX is not a match-making service for "business angels" but acts as an information conduit.

This informal investment sector is said to be worth around \$20bn in the US, five-times larger than the formal venture capital industry. On that basis, DCX reckons the potential value of its market to be at least £10bn in private investment in British SMEs.

The Private Equity Funding Association, the organisation behind DCX, says the marketplace received a major boost in the Budget.

Changes by the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, to the capital gains tax (CGT) regime with the introduction of a long-term, 10-year CGT rate of just 10 per cent is likely to encourage investment in start-up and expanding SMEs whose need is overwhelmingly for long-term, patient capital.

Potential investors surfing on to DCX are immediately presented with a warning, which is more comprehensive than that required by the Financial Services Act. DCX makes it very clear that the onus of "due diligence" rests entirely with the investor who should seek the advice of professional advisers.

The key difference between investing in quoted stock and participating as an investor/director in an unquoted company, is that the business plan is only a basis for negotiation. It is not an investment document and there is no protection should things go wrong.

You can see opportunities currently available on DCX by clicking on a summary listing. These business opportunities remain on the site for 90 days. If you want to go hold of more details, the site offers the option of a £1 "sample" subscription.

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Investors Chronicle 20 March 1998.

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BRIAN TORA

Eastern promise in Tokyo?

Two milestones were passed in stock markets this week. The yield on British ordinary shares fell to the lowest level since World War One. At 2% per cent, shares in London now yield less than at the time of the stock market peaks in 1972 and 1987. If ever warning notes should be sounding, now seems to be the time.

The seemingly inexorable advance of the UK market gave rise also to the second major event as its value overtook that of Japan's. We now have shares worth more than those in the world's second largest economy.

The Japanese stock market has been a little steadier recently. But prices are still significantly below the levels reached at the end of the 1980s, when the Tokyo market was even – briefly – valued at more than Wall Street.

The timing for Tokyo could not be worse. Next week sees the start of financial deregulation in Japan. Inevitably this process has earned the title "Big Bang". This is misleading in so far as it applies to the measures to be introduced on 1 April. But 1 April is just a start. Reforms are planned which will take three years or so to complete, so it will be some time before their efficacy or otherwise is determined. Still, next week is a start, with foreign exchange controls removed and the liberalisation of stockbroking commissions.

Action needed to be taken. Share prices languish at less than half their peak in the late 1980s. One of the big four broking houses, Yamaichi, has collapsed – as has life assurance Nissan Mutual and one of Japan's top banks. Whether this will presage a return to favour for Japanese shares is anyone's guess. Our own Far Eastern experts are still counselling caution. But I am mindful that our own "Big Bang" ushered in a period of immense prosperity for the domestic market. The trouble with the Japanese, though, is that they are too damned inscrutable.

However, the Americans clearly view Japan as an opportunity rather than a threat at present. Fidelity has commenced selling financial

products there, while Merrill Lynch has snapped up many of the brokers laid off by Yamaichi. Japan, after all, has the same problem as the rest of us. An ageing population that will need personal savings to fund retirement.

Unfortunately, the returns achieved by personal savers in Japan has been distinctly underwhelming. It is not just that the economy is in poor shape. Capital markets look archaic when compared with the West, while bond yields have been all but invisible – not just because of deflation either. Investors and savers have taken a back seat while the demands of industry for cheap funding are met. But all this looks set to change.

Among the more interesting announcements that have preceded next week's changes was the decision of leading Japanese pension provider, Nenpuku, to outsource the management of half its funds to foreign advisers. This could be the way ahead for similar operations. Mrs Watanabe is no longer the force she was. The percentage of shares owned by individuals has dropped from over half 40 years ago to barely a fifth today. In this regard Japan is no different to ourselves, but they lack the investment management skills present in London and New York.

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BEST BORROWING RATES

Telephone % Rate and Max. Fee Incentive

MORTGAGES

Bank/Building Soc.	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
West Bromwich BS	5.95%	30.4.00	7.7%	£200
Bradford & Bingley BS	5.95%	31.2.01	7.7%	£200
Northern Rock	6.25%	1.4.03	9.5%	£200

FIXED RATES

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Holiday & Away BS	6.05%	17.4.99	-	No MPF for adv up to 6.75%
Scarborough BS	6.05%	13.3.98	-	Free adv, £250 fee refund
Northern Rock	6.05%	1.4.03	-	£200 rebate, refund fee

VARIABLE DISCOUNTED RATES

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Holiday & Away BS	6.10%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Scarborough BS	6.25%	2 years	8.0%	-
Northern Rock	6.25%	1.4.03	7.7%	£200 rebate, refund fee

FIRST TIME BUYERS FIXED RATES

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Northern Rock	6.05%	03.05.00	4.49%	£100
Birmingham Mts	5.75%	15.01	8.0%	£200
Scarborough BS	5.75%	13.3.98	-	-

FIRST TIME BUYERS VARIABLE DISCOUNTED RATES

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
West Bromwich BS	5.75%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Flamingo & Hedges BS	5.85%	3.3.01	8.0%	£200
Northern Rock	5.85%	5 years	8.0%	£200

UNSECURED PERSONAL LOANS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
West Bromwich BS	6.05%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Flamingo & Hedges BS	6.05%	3.3.01	8.0%	£200
Northern Rock	6.05%	5 years	8.0%	£200

SECURED LOANS (SECOND CHARGE)

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Clydebank Bank	6.75%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Royal Bank of Scotland	6.75%	25.00	8.0%	£200
First Direct	6.75%	1 year	8.0%	£200

OVERDRAFTS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
West Bromwich BS	6.75%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Flamingo & Hedges BS	6.75%	3.3.01	8.0%	£200
Northern Rock	6.75%	5 years	8.0%	£200

CREDIT CARDS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Capital One Bank	6.95%	1 year	8.0%	£200
FISB Adams	6.95%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Co-operative Bank	6.95%	1 year	8.0%	£200

GOLD CARDS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Capital One Bank	6.95%	1 year	8.0%	£200
FISB Adams	6.95%	1 year	8.0%	£200
Co-operative Bank	6.95%	1 year	8.0%	£200

STORE CARDS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
John Lewis	1.25%	18.0%	1.25%	18.0%
Argos	1.25%	26.0%	1.25%	26.0%
FISB Adams	1.25%	26.0%	1.25%	26.0%
Marks & Spencer	1.25%	26.0%	1.25%	26.0%

PEPS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Capital One Bank	12.00%	1 year	12.00%	£200
FISB Adams	12.00%	1 year	12.00%	£200
Co-operative Bank	12.00%	1 year	12.00%	£200

INVESTMENT TRUSTS

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Capital One Bank	12.00%	1 year	12.00%	£200
FISB Adams	12.00%	1 year	12.00%	£200
Co-operative Bank	12.00%	1 year	12.00%	£200

OFFSHORE ACCOUNTS (gross)

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Northern Rock	10.00%	1 year	10.00%	£200
Scotbank	10.00%	1 year	10.00%	£200
Barclays	10.00%	1 year	10.00%	£200
Chase Manhattan	10.00%	1 year	10.00%	£200

NATIONAL SAVINGS ACCOUNTS (gross)

Building Soc./BS	Rate	Term	Fee	Incentive
Investment Accounts	1.00%	1 month	1.00%	

How to find the best unit trusts



THE JONATHAN DAVIS COLUMN

Past performance is not necessarily a guide to the future. The phrase is mandatory in all ad-

vertisements for unit trusts and other equity-based financial products. But what actually does it mean?

By trawling the historical record, and juggling with the start and end dates, there is always one period where the performance of a fund can be made to appear as good as anything else around. If you want to be precise about it, the predictive value of unfiltered past-performance statistics is nil.

The statistical evidence on this point is uncompromising – just as clear, in fact, as the finding that 75 per cent of all managed funds consistently fail to outperform the market averages over a five-year period.

So should one just revert to throwing a dart at a list of unit trusts? Clearly not. Common sense tells us that some fund

managers are better than others. The good news is that the tools to make meaningful comparisons between different funds are becoming both more sophisticated and gradually more widely available. Raw data on the performance of funds is available from a number of sources.

But this still leaves the question of how to interpret the data. A pioneer of sophisticated fund performance analysis in this country is Fund Research, started around 10 years ago by two ex-Fidelity fund managers.

Peter Jeffreys, managing director of Fund Research, uses a combination of a sophisticated quantitative screening system and detailed qualitative assessments of individual managers to rank and rate the best funds in the UK. The main quantitative technique he uses involves look-

ing at the consistency of a fund's performance and the frequency with which it appears in the top echelons of the performance tables. This in turn produces a weighted score which measures consistency. Fund Research also produces a series of statistical measures to measure each fund's risk profile, backed up by detailed interviews with fund managers.

The table shows how the top 10 unit trusts in one particular sector, UK equity growth, measure up. A score of 10 means a fund was in the top 10 per cent of all the funds in its sector in a particular period; a 9 means it ranked in the second 10 per cent, and so on down the list.

The method aims to weed out funds which, thanks to one particularly good year, suddenly appear in the top echelons

UK Equity growth - performance order net income reinvested

	Consistency					
	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	Score
BGI UK Growth	9	8	9	9	9	87.0
SAP Premier Equity Growth	8	7	8	8	8	81.8
Fidelity Special Situations	10	9	7	10	6	78.8
Jupiter UK Growth	10	8	10	9	4	78.8
Sainsbury UK Growth	4	7	10	10	5	78.8
Fidelity UK Growth	8	9	8	8	7	78.3
Barclays Balanced Growth	6	3	9	9	7	78.3
Martin Currie UK Growth	4	10	10	8	5	78.3
Barclays UK Enterprises	9	9	10	8	4	78.3
Perpetual UK Growth	8	8	10	8	6	75.5

Source: Fund Research

predictive power of the performance figures from events to about 2-3 m. In other words, there is a two-thirds chance that a fund which scores well in the consistency tables will stay above average in the future – which is better, but not a clincher.

You would not know from the table alone, for example, that the number one trust, BGI UK Growth fund, had a very indifferent record in the five years immediately before the period covered by this analysis. At the time, it was known as the Barclays Unicorn Special Situations fund, and the new fund has been formed by amalgamating it with two other funds in the old Unicorn stable.

It is now run in a quite different way from its predecessor (for the better in my view). So, even with sophisticated

tools, you or your financial advisor still have to do some detective work to pick out the best funds – and even the very best fund managers have occasional poor years. Mr Jeffreys makes the point that this tends to happen when markets are running away with themselves, (now being a case in point).

The wider point, however, is the more important one. Better screening facilities means buyers are becoming more sophisticated, which in turn is forcing providers to sharpen up their act.

The remarkable fact about the unit trust business, in retrospect, is not how few consistently good performers there have been – but how so many of the also rans have survived for so long, despite providing a rotten service to their users.

UNDERSTANDING THE STOCK MARKET: JOHN ANDREW

Buying shares? First pick your broker

A luxury service costs money. So decide how much you want to pay your stockbroker



Dial-a-deal: Telephone dealing is – usually – easy

Photograph: Nicola Kurtz

Shares can be bought or sold only through a stockbroker who is a member of the London Stock Exchange. Share-dealing services come in many forms: by phone or post, and in person.

You will see advertisements for telephone share-dealing services in newspapers and magazines. Many people use the services offered by their bank or building society, while others prefer to deal direct with a broker. It depends on the level of service you require.

The service offered by telephone and in the high street tends to be "no frills". The term used to describe this basic buying and selling of shares is the somewhat macabre phrase "execution only"; the institution will undertake your instructions, but will not give investment advice.

This does not mean that they will not guide you through the procedure for the transaction. On request, some will also provide basic information such as the current price, yield and the p/e ratio. However, should you be undecided as to which of two shares to purchase, no advice will be forthcoming.

This is perfectly adequate for anyone who knows precisely what they want. It also has the advantage of being inexpensive. Typically, for deals below £5,000, the charge is 1 per cent on the value of the transaction, subject to a minimum of £20. If periodically you are likely to want to telephone for basic information, do check that the company will provide this.

It is easy to set up an execution-only arrangement. As your bank or building society already know you, this will be a mere formality. However, where you are not known, you may be asked to give your address and banking details in addition to providing some form of identity.

If you would like to control your own portfolio of shares, but would like the safety net of being able to fall back on the opinion of a professional, you require an advisory facility. This is a basic service available from traditional stockbrokers, and is more expensive than the execution only share dealing that is available in the high street. The commission for the deals, which is calculated as a percentage of the shares traded, will include an element for the advice.

By opting for an advisory service, you are establishing a relationship with a broker. Normally there will be an initial interview, which is conducted without fee charged. Do your homework before this, for in order to conform to the regulatory requirements, the broker will

have to complete a "fact find". He will want to know details of your income, commitments and assets, whether you are looking for income or growth, and your attitude towards risk.

It is only by asking such questions that the broker will be able to give you good advice based on your circumstances. Many investors consider that the higher commission is well worth paying to have advice readily available. However, do not abuse the service by constantly telephoning for a chat if you deal only occasionally. Should you develop a good rapport with the broker, you could well find that you receive a phone call if an investment opportunity arises which he or she considers may interest you.

Many stockbrokers and all institutions offering private banking offer a complete portfolio management service to clients. This comes in two forms – discretionary and advisory. With a discretionary arrangement, the service provider takes full control of the portfolio, buying and selling shares with the aim of maximising the client's objectives.

For a copy of the directory of stockbrokers, contact APCIMS, 112 Middlesex Street, London E1 7HY (0171-247 7080).

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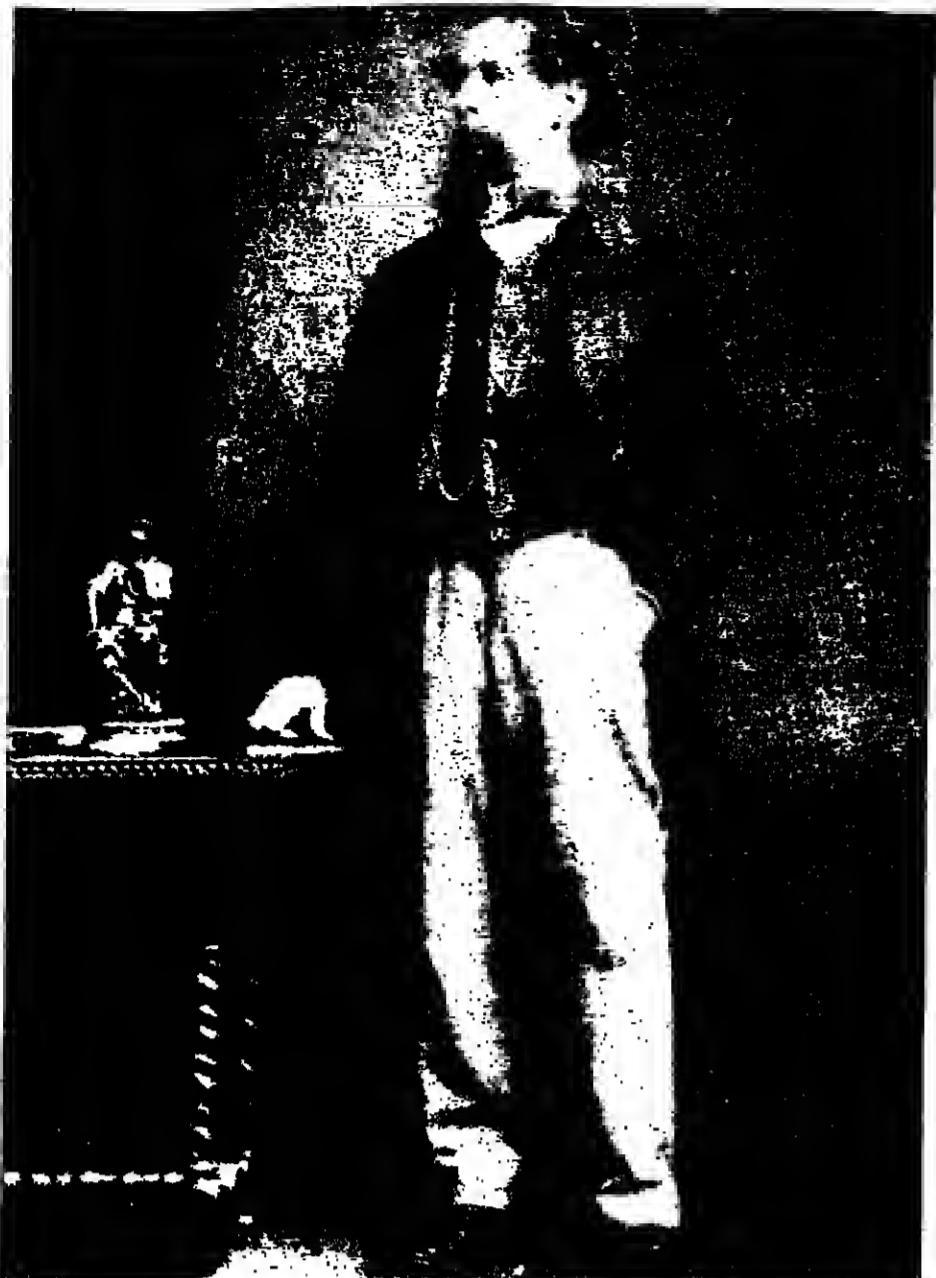
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Paper profits: Dickens' signature on the back adds a grand or two to this photograph

COLLECT TO INVEST: JOHN WINDSOR

Marks of distinction

It is 1914 in Petrograd. Amid guttering candles, the mad monk Rasputin is holding a seance with his followers in a private house. Suddenly, in the gloom, his eyes flash. He scribbles a note and passes it to the host. The note reads: "Bright light does not come from dark coffers."

A dark thought that will give nightmares unless it is burned. But the note has survived. You can buy it for an estimated £3,000-£4,000 at Sotheby's sale of a big private collection of autograph letters on Tuesday (10.30am).

Is it worth paying that much for a scrap of paper? Well, the note comes with a written authentication by the host, Mahivaky - a revelation to some historians who still believe that Rasputin was illiterate. It is a great rarity.

Apart from that, its value lies both in Rasputin's name - he is likely to remain one of history's big bogeymen for generations to come - and in the fascinating content of the note. This is no mere reply to an invitation to tea.

On the minus side, the note is written in Russian and has no immediate appeal to English speakers. You would have to give your friends a mini-lecture, showing them Sotheby's catalogue and Mahivaky's testimony in order to impress

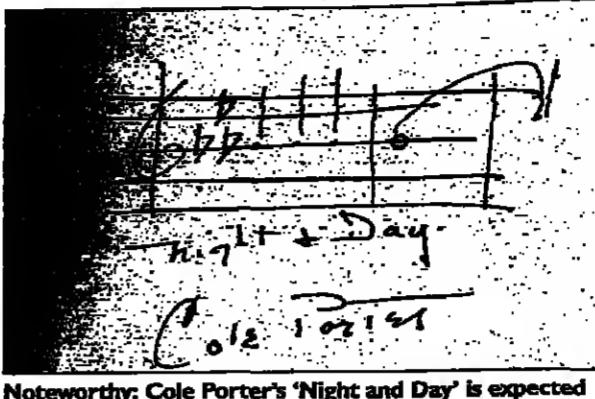
them. And Russian autograph history is a narrow field. Not many people collect it, so prices across the board are not likely to take off.

Fame, content, rarity - these are the main considerations when contemplating buying, autograph letters and signed photographs for investment.

Put simply, value is largely determined by news value (good journalists should make good investors). For example, a signed photograph of Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, is worth \$450 (£280) to collectors, while one signed by the second man on the moon - who was he, now? Ah, yes, Buzz Aldrin - is worth only \$270 (£170).

Most important of all: paper is being made obsolete by information technology. Few of today's up-coming historical and literary figures start their day by penning a score of letters - so the value of those that survive is bound to rise. A run-of-the-mill letter by gloomy Gladstone can still be had for around £75 and one by dashing Disraeli for £300. (Disraeli wrote fewer letters, so his have an added rarity value.)

Tuesday's sale consists of 488 lots from the collection of the Hollywood film director George Cosmatos and his late wife, Birgita. Cosmatos sums up what must be the enduring



Noteworthy: Cole Porter's 'Night and Day' is expected to fetch up to £2,000 on Tuesday

appeal of manuscripts as opposed to computer printouts: "If we touched a letter or a document written by an historical figure, it was though a tiny part of their life would become ours by osmosis through our fingertips. We felt that through the collection we caught glimpses of thousands of secret worlds."

The sale is likely to be a landmark, fixing prices for the next couple of years. It ranges widely from autographs by European literary and musical figures to those of lesser-known explorers, such as Sir Samuel Baker, whose letter of 1879 depicting the British occupation of Cyprus, estimated £1,200-£1,500, will have more appeal to public than private collections.

The collection, expected to raise £400,000, might have fetched more in New York or Los Angeles, but the European material, and Cosmatos's long association with Sotheby's London - where he bought heavily in the Eighties, have brought it here. Rich Americans can buy by telephone but they cannot view lots by telephone and this will dampen bidding somewhat. Also, Sotheby's has made sure not to over-egg estimates - as befits a big load of collectable landing in the market in one go.

This could be the making of the market for autograph musical quotations - those few bars of favourite tunes dashed off by composers for admirers. They are much rarer than their letters. Cosmatos specialised in them. The star turn is Puccini's hand-drawn stave with a snatch of 'Tosca's duet with Cavaradossi in Act I of *Tosca*: £1,000-£1,500. But there is also Cole Porter's black-ink *Night and Day* (£1500-£2,000), which must be "our tune" for countless couples - some of them with money to spend.

Then there are the signed photographs. Ten years ago, these were looked down on

because of their lack of content. Mere name hunting was frowned on. But they have now acquired cross-over value due to the increased interest in the history of photography.

A *carte-de-visite* full-length photograph of Dickens - they are rarer than you might think - is estimated £3,000-£3,500 in the sale. The fact that it is signed on both sides has - unaccountably, to me, at any rate - added a grand or two to its value.

The same photograph was bought by Cosmatos for £6,325 (£4,000) in another landmark sale at Christie's East in New York in April 1994. This

sale, of another private collection, put signed photographs on the map. A big, 13in by 10in

signed photograph of the composer Mahler - a wonderful image - made a whopping £22,633 (£14,000). In the same sale, a photograph signed by the youth Churchill in 1905 made £3,450 (£2,000).

Churchill is in big demand in

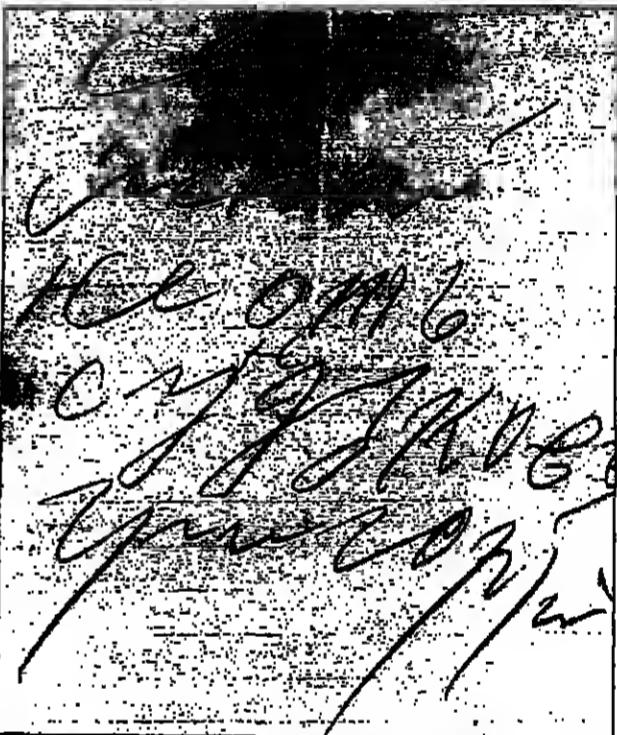
the United States - as are all World War II autographs. Veterans of the war are at an age when their families have fled the coop and many have time and money to collect. In the forthcoming sale, a photograph of Field Marshal Montgomery receiving the German surrender at Luneberg Heath on 4 May 1945, signed by him at a later date, is estimated £800-£1,200.

And are autographs by French Impressionists under-priced? The market for their paintings and the market for their autographs probably do not influence one another. But a letter by Camille Pisarro in which he prices his paintings at 1,000-2,000 francs - a thousand times less than they fetched following his death in 1903 - must be a snap at an estimated £600-£800.

Beware of ephemeral ephemera. In the same game, the names of film stars and sportsmen are much less likely to hold their value than those of statesmen and literary-artistic figures - even after you have sifted out the Auto-pen signatures doled out to film fans.

Here are some cautionary examples: Jane Russell's signed photograph, now worth £25 (£15), was worth £30-£40 during her heyday in the Fifties. One signed by Mary Pickford, "the world's sweetheart" in the Thirties, is worth £35. Arthur Askey, the Forties radio comic: a pitiful £1.

Sotheby's, 34-35 New Bond St, London W1 (0171-293 5000).



Imperial relics This note by Russian monk Rasputin from a seance in 1914 is estimated at £3,000-£4,000

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M&G Securities	3rd	3rd	6th	6th	5th
Perpetual	4th	4th	2nd	3rd	2nd
Mercury Fund M'ngs	5th	6th	5th	5th	6th
Fidelity Investments	6th	5th	4th	4th	1st
Schroder UT Ltd	7th	7th	7th	7th	7th

*Source: Investment Intelligence, 1/2/95, offer to sell basis. Largest 7 Unit Trust Management Groups' relative weighted performance based on 1994 performance

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STOP PRESS! What Investment Overall Fund Management Group of the Year - 10th March 1998

PEPS. SPOILED FOR CHOICE? OR SIMPLY CONFUSED?



Choosing a tax-free PEP can be a pretty taxing business - especially with so many PEP companies, all making claim and counter claim about why they're the best.

Here are six thoughts that may help you to find your way through the PEP maze.

1. How can all PEP companies advertise excellent investment performance?

Most funds perform well at one time or another. You may find that a fund has performed well for a particular period, but not at other times. The acid test is long-term consistency. Year in, year out. Not just in one fund, but in the company's range of funds.

2. How can so many PEP companies advertise investment awards?

In such a large and competitive industry, there are a lot of awards to win. Some companies win an award one year, only to disappear the next. On the other hand, a company that wins major awards every year is hard to ignore.

3. Which is better - funds that track an index or funds which are actively managed?

Each has its place. But trackers can't avoid investing in big companies when they're falling, and are unable to invest a bigger proportion of money in them when they're rising. An actively managed fund has the freedom to do both.

4. Is a large PEP provider better than a small one?

Both have their merits. But a large provider is more likely to be able to offer you the extensive resources, investment choice and consistent track record that you're looking for.

5. How important is service?

PEP managers deal with the Inland Revenue so that you don't have to. That's why finding a PEP Manager with fast, efficient and helpful administration and service is vital.

6. How important are the fund managers?

For actively managed PEPs, the quality of the investment team is essential. Make sure you choose a company which is able to retain top-quality fund managers rather than a company which is used as a stepping-stone to greater things.

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Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Best Unit Trust Products
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Best PEP Provider
Money Marketing
 Best Unit Trust Provider
Money Marketing

SERVICE
 Fund Management Group of the Year
Personal Investment Marketing Show
 Best PEP Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Best Unit Trust Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Five Star Service Award
The IFA Association and Financial Adviser

1996

INVESTMENT
 Fund Management Group of the Year
Investment Week
 Best Investment Management Group of the Year
Microplan
 Best PEP Provider
Money Marketing
 Best Unit Trust Provider
Money Marketing

SERVICE
 Fund Management Group of the Year
Personal Investment Marketing Show
 Best PEP Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Best Unit Trust Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Five Star Service Award
The IFA Association and Financial Adviser
 Best Service - Investments
Savings Market

1995

INVESTMENT
 Overall Unit Trust Group of the Year
The Sunday Telegraph
 Overall Unit Trust Group of the Year
What Investment/Personal Finance
 Best PEP Provider
Money Marketing
 Best Unit Trust Provider
Money Marketing
 Best Investment Management Group of the Year
Microplan

SERVICE
 Fund Management Group of the Year
Personal Investment Marketing Show
 Best PEP Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Best Unit Trust Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Five Star Service Award
The IFA Association and Financial Adviser
 Best Service - Investments
Savings Market

1994

INVESTMENT
 Best Overall Group Performance
Money Management
 Fund Management Group of the Year
What Investment
 Best UK Investment Trust
Money Observer

SERVICE
 Fund Management Group of the Year
Personal Investment Marketing Show
 Best PEP Service
Sherwood/Planned Savings
 Five Star Service Award
The IFA Association and Financial Adviser

1993

INVESTMENT
 International Unit Trust Manager of the Year
The Sunday Times
 Overall Unit Trust Group of the Year
The Sunday Telegraph
 Unit Trust Manager of the Year
The Observer

SERVICE
 Fund Management Group of the Year
Personal Investment Marketing Show
 Five Star Service Award
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These are a selection of more than 100 awards which Perpetual has won over the last five years.

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Perpetual has been voted top PEP Provider for the last four years' and Fund Management Group of the Year for the last five years' in polls of Independent Financial Advisers. We've also been named Unit Trust Manager of the Year by What Investment Magazine for the last five years. Just a selection of more than 150 investment and service awards that we've won since we began investing in 1974.

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Last year, Perpetual sold more unit trust PEP funds than any other company.³ Overall, we manage more unit trust PEP funds than any other company.⁴ And we manage more than 550,000 individual plans. In 1997 alone, more than 135,000 people opened a PEP with Perpetual.

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The quality of Perpetual's service has earned top place in a poll of Independent Financial Advisers at their annual industry conference for the last five years running.⁵

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Perpetual's reputation for investment excellence means that we attract and retain some of the best fund managers in the industry. And because they stay with Perpetual, you get consistency of investment style and a solid foundation for your choice of PEP.

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We've found

Cut the cost of saving for retirement

Personal pension holders may be paying £400m a year unnecessarily. John Chapman details the charge against the providers

Planning for retirement is an essential part of every individual's overall financial strategy. Private pensions, or stakeholder variants of them as proposed by the current Government, are one way of achieving this.

But research carried out for *The Independent* shows policyholders may be paying up to £400m a year more than they should into poor-value plans.

This is caused by the whopping charges many companies impose on the private pensions they sell. In particular, those who are forced to half contributions into their schemes in the early years can be left with minimal lump sums with which to buy an income at retirement.

The table alongside this story illustrates what returns policyholders might get, and what companies may take in charges when premiums are

sist" with a policy over given periods of time.

The table shows that three-year "persistencies" range from 89 per cent with Standard Life (this means only 10 per cent of plans have lapsed after three years) to 88 per cent with Sun Life (almost 40 per cent of plans lapse after three years).

It is worth noting that the income received by companies from the policies they sell generally increases with the number of years they are kept up (though Allied Dunbar's plateaued out early). This means life offices with high persistency rates, like NPI and Standard Life, take higher average amounts in charges than their charging levels might suggest.

It is possible to estimate whether companies charge more than they should from the policies they sell? One way is to construct a hypothetical "benchmark" plan, with charges of only an initial 3 per cent bid/offer spread and an annual fund management charge of 1 per cent.

Such charges are reasonable, though they should be lower than the average for all plans, which might average £400-450. Assuming sales of about 1 million plans a year, the overall extra cost to planholders is up to £400m a year.

They are higher than those for French savings products and in line with the average for UK unit trusts. They are actually bettered by a few pension companies, including some in the table below. The average company "take" for such a benchmark plan would be £1,470. The table also shows an "average" plan from a previous survey which would bring an average take of £2,100. In effect, this is an "extra" cost of £630 above that on the benchmark.

Such an extra cost arises on a plan with premiums of £200 a month. In one recent report by a financial regulator, average premiums are put at £112 a month, so the average extra "take" would be lower. But the report also shows that charges bear more heavily on smaller policies as some elements are fixed. Compared with the benchmark plan, the extra cost for all plans might average £400-450. Assuming sales of about 1 million plans a year, the overall extra cost to planholders is up to £400m a year.

What they take and what you get

Projected returns to policyholders and charges taken by companies

Returns to holders if premiums stop - at 2 yrs and maturity, %	Company	Persistency after 3 years, %	Charges (discounted) taken by companies at maturity, £	Average Take in charges £
8.2	Equitable Life	89.6*	388	766
7.7	Marks & Spencer	65.3**	613	1089
7.8	Virgin	66.3*	583	1140
7.1	Alliance & Leicester	66.3**	664	1297
6.9	Legal & General	71.5	922	1818
6.7	Standard Life	89.6	689	1739
6.8	Scottish Widows	84.6	910	1818
4.7	Norwich Union	77.2	1780	2059
4.9	Scottish Life	73.4	1670	1874
4.7	NPI	84.7	1669	2265
4.2	Scottish Amicable	82.0	1612	2255
3.9	General Accident	79.4	1788	2300
4.7	NatWest	67.4	1688	2179
4.8	Barclays	69.6	1638	2358
2.8	Allied Dunbar	68.3	2156	2203
3.3	Scottish Equitable	71.8	2050	2740
3.3	Sun Life	58.9	2059	2246
3.9	Black Horse	62.8	1888	2500
2.9	Standa	74.4	2148	2802
5.2	AVERAGE	72.3	1545	2107
7.6	BENCHMARK	na	639	1324

Note: *Projections assume 15 yr pension plan, with £200 pm premiums, and investment growth of 9.69% pa. The AVERAGE plan is the average of the plans in the above Money Management survey, assuming persistency figures from the PPA report of November 1997. The persistency figures for Equitable Life are taken as the same as Standard Life's. **Persistency rates are taken as the average for direct sales firms. The projected take is charged at 10% pa. The average take uses the projected charges and persistency rate for each company.

Source: Money Management, 1997/John Chapman

The watchdogs that failed to bark

Financial watchdogs appear unconcerned about the extra costs paid by hapless investors who take out personal pensions.

The latest report from the Personal Investment Authority, the front-line regulator, describes the charges on products sold by salesmen (as opposed to those bought off the page) as the "price of advice". It differentiates this from commission levels earned by the salespeople, which it calls the "cost of advice".

About two-thirds of the total bill to pension companies of the policies they sell come from "distribution costs" – that is, commissions to their salesmen/advisers and on marketing

expenses. Are the regulators deluding themselves (or others) by calling the cost of chasing down clients, known in the trade as "prospecting", and of completing sales as the "price of advice"?

In April last year, a joint investigation between *The Independent* and the *World in Action* television programme suggested that sales-patter rather than advice dominated, as far as many salespeople were concerned. A 50 per cent hike in commissions paid to salespeople reflected a battle by companies to secure distribution rather than better advice.

More recently, leading providers, in recognition of the need to cut charges for better informed clients, have offered independent financial advisers (IFAs) a "menu approach".

They give IFAs the choice between their "usual" plan with high upfront commission (which appears in industry surveys) and a lower-charge plan with a lower commission spread over several years.

Many, if not most, IFAs stick with the usual plan as they would have cash flow problems if they abandoned upfront commissions. But others are taking the flatter commissions and switching to the more competitive products, with charges much in line with our benchmark product. Can any-

one call the extra charges in the less-competitive usual products the "cost of advice"?

Another criticism of the regulators is their profligacy with public money. The recent study by Business Strategies, a consultancy acting for Direct Line, the telephone financial services provider, showed that the Treasury was spending £300m a year in tax relief for pension plans.

The study estimated that with about 1 million people taking out plans each year, and with over 300,000 of them lapsing within three years, some £100m a year of tax relief is "wasted" on products that will deliver poor or even non-existent payouts at retirement.

In fact, much of this tax relief is in effect passed on from losing planholders to the pension companies. As such, it must represent one of the most unjustified subsidies of an industry that has ever been given. Are any Parliamentary watchdogs taking note?

John Chapman

The Independent has produced a "Guide to Direct Pensions", written by Nic Cicutti, its personal finance editor. The 26-page guide, sponsored by Eagle Star, a provider of cheap pensions by phone, covers a wide range of topics linked to retirement planning. It is available by calling 0800 776666. Or check the coupon on page 4.

While the sins of the regulators may largely result from a faulty Thatcherite concept of self-regulation, the quixotic proposal of stakeholder pensions is Blairite. This idea will really be "extravagantly romantic" if a wide variety of organisations, including employers, trade unions, retailers or any affinity groups are to offer new pension plans.

Will many of such organisations understand what they are up to? How will the new plans dovetail with the existing pension options? Will the result be bureaucratic and regulatory nightmares?

The better way ahead would be to build on the good features of the present pension plans and to oblige other providers to

come into line with them. There are already low-charge and good-value products offered by several providers, including Equitable Life, a range of direct sellers like Virgin, Marks & Spencer, Direct Line, Eagle Star, Merchant Investors and Legal & General, high street names like Alliance & Leicester, Nationwide and some traditional pension companies dealing with financially strong IFAs who are willing to take lower commissions.

The regulations must now tell the other providers that they have also to offer plans with charges and flexibility in line with benchmark plans or their equivalent. Otherwise, there should be no tax relief forthcoming on their particular products.

With such a scenario all the plans on offer would be good value. No planholders would face automatic losses or poor returns. Planholders could be saved £400m a year. Exchequer funding through tax reliefs would no longer be supporting poor products and practices.

All that would remain to create fully portable plans would be to require employers to contribute to the new plans as they do with occupational schemes.

The essentials of stakeholder plans would also be delivered.

There would be no mis-selling,

as you cannot mis-sell a good product.

John Chapman

How a stakeholder scandal could still be averted

*Source: Mirapol, offer to bid. Income taken, for period 1/1/1988 to 1/3/98 (equivalent 5 year figure +85.75%). 1/3/93 to 1/3/98. **Source: Mirapol, all Square offer to bid, gross income reinvested, for periods ending 1/9/98. Past performance is not necessarily a guide to the future. The price of units and the income from them is not guaranteed and can fall as well as rise. The Equity Income Trust has been available as a PEP since May 1993. Full written terms and conditions are available on request. For your security, all calls are recorded. When the tax status of PEPs changes after 6/4/99, subject to any Government limits, you will be able to transfer to a Royal & Sun Alliance ISA free of any administration charge. Royal & Sun Alliance Unit Trust Management Limited, registered in England, no 217042, is a member of the Royal & Sun Alliance Life & Pensions Marketing Group. Registered Office 1 Bartholomew Lane, London, EC3N 2AB. Members of the Royal & Sun Alliance Life & Pensions Marketing Group are regulated by the Personal Investment Authority, solely for life assurance, pensions and unit trust business, and by IMRO.

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PEP

We've found our place in the sun...

Fancy a cottage abroad with vines winding around the door? There is plenty of advice available, writes Fiona Brandhorst

Flicking through the pages of *World of Property*, it's easy to get carried away. I was practically writing the cheque for the four-bed finca, within half an hour's drive of the Spanish coast. The price? A mere £19,750 - the cost of a lock-up garage in London.

Buying a property in central Brittany was a compromise for Jill and Anton, who still yearn for their back-packing days. Now they are living in London with two small children, travelling has been put on the back burner. But two years ago they bought a Thirties farmhouse and barn. They paid £28,000, when the franc was at its strongest; today it would have cost only £21,000.

"It was owned by a French family who'd long since left for Paris," says Anton, "who has made 16 trips across the Channel to carry out the renovations. He has employed local tradesmen to do some of the work, but he's tackled most jobs himself



Plain sailing? It may take a while to get your holiday home up to scratch. Photograph: Rex

with the help of friends willing to spend the odd weekend in France. The main house had just two big rooms on each floor, with a staircase to the attic.

The interior has been replastered and partitioned on the first floor to make three bedrooms and a bathroom.

"I took out some builders from the local pub in my home town in Lancashire to repaint the two buildings. The French workers wanted £10,000 for the job. My lads did it for £4,500, but it took them 17 days."

When the renovations, costing around £20,000, are finished

later this year, Jill and Anton will at last be able to stay in the house instead of on a site nearby.

It's not the sort of village where you meet English people, even in the local bars, and the vegetables in the supermarket two miles away still mud them. "It's idyllic," says Anton. "Nothing to do except go to the sandy beaches. Once we've spent some time here though, I'll be yearning to go to Florida or Spain for a change."

If you want to buy a property abroad it's essential to take expert and independent legal advice, preferably on recom-

mendation. Jill and Anton bought their farmhouse through a French property agency advertising in the magazine *Living France*. They paid a commission of £1,400 to the agency's English link man who covered all the legal aspects of the sale. This included dealing with contracts, visiting solicitors and even taking them to see the local mayor to sign off for water and property taxes. They agree that it was money well spent. Anton still calls him for advice.

Nino Amadio is the Italian connection for many Brits wishing to find "hidden" Italy. De-

spite the popularity of Tuscany, it's still possible to pick up a reasonably priced property in the Lucca region in the north. Mr Amadio's properties start at £24,000 for a renovated one-up, one-down stone cottage with stable set amid meadows and cherry trees. With an outside WC, the cottage is hardly luxurious.

But think of the "charming" trattoria (well known for boat gatherings) a 100-metre sprint from the front door. Or, for £53,000, you can enjoy the views from a detached stone house with two bedrooms, large kitchen and separate ham (ripe for conversion), overlooking a large medieval fortress floodlit at night.

Such is demand for property that Abbey National and Woolwich have set up branches in Italy providing bigger and quicker loans compared to the Italian lenders.

Mr Amadio's clients are usually professional people with cash, looking for their own piece of Italy. He takes clients through all the legal processes as well as recommending local "artisans" to carry out renovation work. Agents in Italy get commission from both vendor and purchaser. "You won't find For Sale signs dotted about," Mr Amadio says. "I spend countless weeks finding property, speaking to the locals in harsh. You have to be Italian to do it, or the price is doubled."

Gill and Ralph Brown's Spanish home is in a small village 45 miles south of Alicante, surrounded by banana palms, mandarin and fig trees. Renovation work on the main house has taken 18 months and is almost complete. Contrary to popular belief, the Spanish builders they've employed have been "absolutely fabulous".

Gill has masterminded the project and with the help of an architect friend, drew up plans to renovate the property to make a three-bedroom house and one-bedroom apartment in the attached barn.

They found the property through Alfredo, highly recommended by a Spanish friend.

A retired builder friend checked over the building, then Alfredo sought the title deeds and made the appropriate legal arrangements. "He did so much running around for us, and charged very little," says Ralph.

With so much information available, there's no excuse for falling foul of international property laws. You're far more likely to have problems with friends and relatives as they queue up for their cheap holidays in the sun.

World of Property 0181-542 9088; 'Buying a Home Abroad' (Survival Books, £9.95) 01937 843523; Nino Amadio 01908 265008; Federation of Overseas Property Developers, Agents & Consultants 0181-941 4499.

A tenanted property up for sale used to spell trouble. Purchasers, banks and building societies were all equally nervous and vendors became resigned to chopping the asking price. But this could all be about to change as tenants in certain properties become as safe as other liabilities.

Among the growing number of people buying for investment are those who realise that a property with a tenant has an enormous advantage. Although a feature of the commercial property world, it is still in its infancy in the residential sector.

If the British have become more sophisticated in their approach to investing in

property, it is in large part due to the influence of the Far East, and it is these buyers from Hong Kong and Singapore who are now most likely to be selling their central London investments mid-tenancy.

Hamptons International is among the first to recognise the market. George Humphreys, who has set up a new department within investment lettings, says it removes uncertainties. "As a buyer you acquire a property with an income stream, so you know the yield," Mr Humphreys says.

In Manchester, Robert Jordan has seen his residential letting agency inundated with young professional couples renting out property they never intend to live in. "They have good incomes and want to get a foothold in the property market, even though they don't intend to settle down yet. Buying a property that already has a tenant would be ideal, and I see it as an emerging market. Tenancy agreements must, of course, include the right of the landlord to pass it on to someone else."

As a member of the Association of Residential Letting Agents, which launched the Buy to Let scheme in 1996, he is less sure how the mortgage lenders would react. "I have my doubts as to whether they are up to speed on this," he admits.

The deals offered by the mortgage companies since have encouraged many new, small investors. They are able to borrow up to 80 per cent and can take repayments during quiet periods.

Douglas & Gordon, estate agents, have

just sold a refurbished three-bedroom mansion flat overlooking a park and tennis courts and within walking distance of Putney tube station in London. The asking price was £250,000 and it will be let for £375 a week, giving a gross return of about 8 per cent. "But if you are really only interested in yields, ex-council flats are in great demand," says James Bailey. "There were recently four investors after a three-bedroom flat in a small Fulham block, with parking and a garden, on the market for

£100,000. The buyer will get a 12 per cent yield and after 10 years will probably sell for £150,000 more."

And if anybody thought the Thatcher legacy had died, they only need look at the shrewd council tenants themselves, adds Mr Bailey. "They might have paid about £20,000 or £30,000 for a flat, but as they were not allowed to sell for two years, they rented the property out and bought out of town on the income."

Penny Jackson

Correction: last week, an editing error saw Beanty Pearce referred to as solicitors. They are, of course, London estate agents.

Sitting on a gold mine? The residential sector learns to love tenants

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How to draw the buyers in

First impressions count when you're selling your property, and your windows on the world count most. Rosalind Russell lifts the veil on the curtain options.

Owning unfashionable curtains is hardly a hanging offence, but as far as estate agents are concerned they don't help a property to reach its potential asking price.

The agents Cluttons Daniel Smith even send a staff member round to clients' homes before a viewer is due, to make sure blinds have been lifted and curtains drawn to maximise light in the rooms and create the right impression.

Cluttons also advises removing net curtains altogether (they make a room look as though its eyes are closed), having windows cleaned and investing in curtain tie-backs to make the room look more dressy. It may sound nit-picky, but the company's marketing policy is paying off. Good first impressions, it claims, have led to more viewings and sales.

Sales have been known to fall through because a buyer insisted on having the curtains included in the price of a property. "It all gets out of perspective," says Noel Flint of agents Knight Frank.

"Sometimes the curtains were made to match the bedspread, so the vendor wants to take them. We've even had a buyer demand the bedspread as well. But some people get very attached to their curtains, especially bachelors who consider they paid a fortune for them years ago and don't see why they should buy new ones now."



Curtains for you: hand-woven curtains in ten colours are among the ranges available from the Futo Company

Also good value, The Pier's tab-top single panel in sheer white with bright spots (100cm x 210cm) costs £29.95, and the metal curtain rod to go with it costs from £6.95, depending on length.

The Pukka Palace also sells loop-tab-top single curtain in dyed cotton voile, in star, leaf and swirl designs. Chunky rope tie-backs cost £9.50 each. As a clever variation on a theme, the pale grey patterned curtain fades from top to bottom, as does the golden yellow, while the indigo fades from sides to cote. They cost £18.50 each and measure 110cm by 228cm. At that price, you could even afford to leave them for an admiring buyer.

Marks & Spencer's ready-made Ottoman curtains in unfussy styles are unlikely to date quickly. They come with loop top, pelmet top, pencil pleat or sail-style eyelet top in cream, dark indigo, terracotta and pale yellow. Prices start at £65 a pair.

And if you do want your curtains to match the duvet cover, Coloroll do a range of ready-made curtains with matching bed linen. Perfect for spring, the Chantilly curtains, in lemon and white with spring flowers, cost from £45 a pair.

Off The Rails 0171-7369190;
The Pukka Palace 0345 666660;
The Pier 0171-8145020; *Marks & Spencer Home Direct* 0345 902902; *Coloroll* 0800 0564878.

THREE TO VIEW: HOLIDAY HOMES

As anyone who's tried to book a pretty country cottage for the Easter holidays will know, the best ones were all spoken for months – sometimes even a year – ago. Better to guarantee your holiday by buying a holiday home of your own, you may think, and rent it out when you don't need it. However, if you want a holiday cottage company to handle the lets, you'll find most will insist on being able to rent it during the peak times. Owners usually find themselves left with the weeks no one else wants.

You can handle the lets yourself, although that means chasing money, and finding a reliable cleaner. And there are tax allowances for running the property as a business. On the other hand, you could just keep it all to yourself... These three would be perfect.

The Toll House in Nether Stowey, eight miles from Bridgwater in Somerset, is in the centre of the village at the foot of the Quantock Hills, in prime holiday country. The owner already lets the curved, converted toll house a holiday cottage. Although the house is small, and doesn't have a garden, it's exactly the sort to appeal to holiday-makers with an eye for the unusual. The front has Gothic-style windows and a Gothic door leading directly into an irregular shaped sitting room. An oak panel above the door shows ducks swimming. The kitchen is just 9ft 3in by 5ft 6in, but is fitted with units, hob and oven. There's space for a washer/drier. Upstairs, there's one bedroom, with a half-moon-shaped window, and a bathroom. Fixtures and fittings are to be negotiated separately. Agents Greenslade Taylor Hunt are asking £56,500 (01278 425555).



Mid Town of Bellyback is a three-bedroom cottage whose odd name is a mystery. It lies two miles up a no through road near Dufftown in Morayshire, and has uninterrupted views across its half-acre gardens to the Highland countryside. The hall has a curved staircase and leads to a sitting-room and lounge with interconnecting doors. The sitting-room has a built-in fish tank, which can be left if a buyer wants it. The 20ft lounge has partial wood paneling on the walls, and bookshelves built along one wall. It has an 18ft 10in farmhouse kitchen with oak-fronted units and a Rayburn, which heats the water. Outside, there is a large parking area and a landscaped garden with a five-tier pond and wooden bridge. There is a private water supply and mains electricity. The agents GA are asking for offers around £75,000.



John Hirst Cottage is a real Hansel and Gretel cottage, tucked in the middle of the woods in a Cheshire country park. It's reached via a half-mile track running alongside a river. The three-bedroom house was originally lived in by Etherow Country Park's warden, and was known as Keg Cottage. It was renamed in John Hirst's memory. The house has a large kitchen/dining-room, plus a separate dining-room with a brick-built open fire. It leads into a 15ft sitting room with a stone open fire and hearth, and a beamed ceiling. Two of the bedrooms have built-in wardrobes; the main bedroom has a cast-iron fireplace with tiled hearth. Many of the rooms have views over the country park. The gardens include a raised lawn with borders and pathways, enclosed by rhododendron hedging. The agents, Burlings, are asking for offers over £150,000 (0161 427 4096).



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